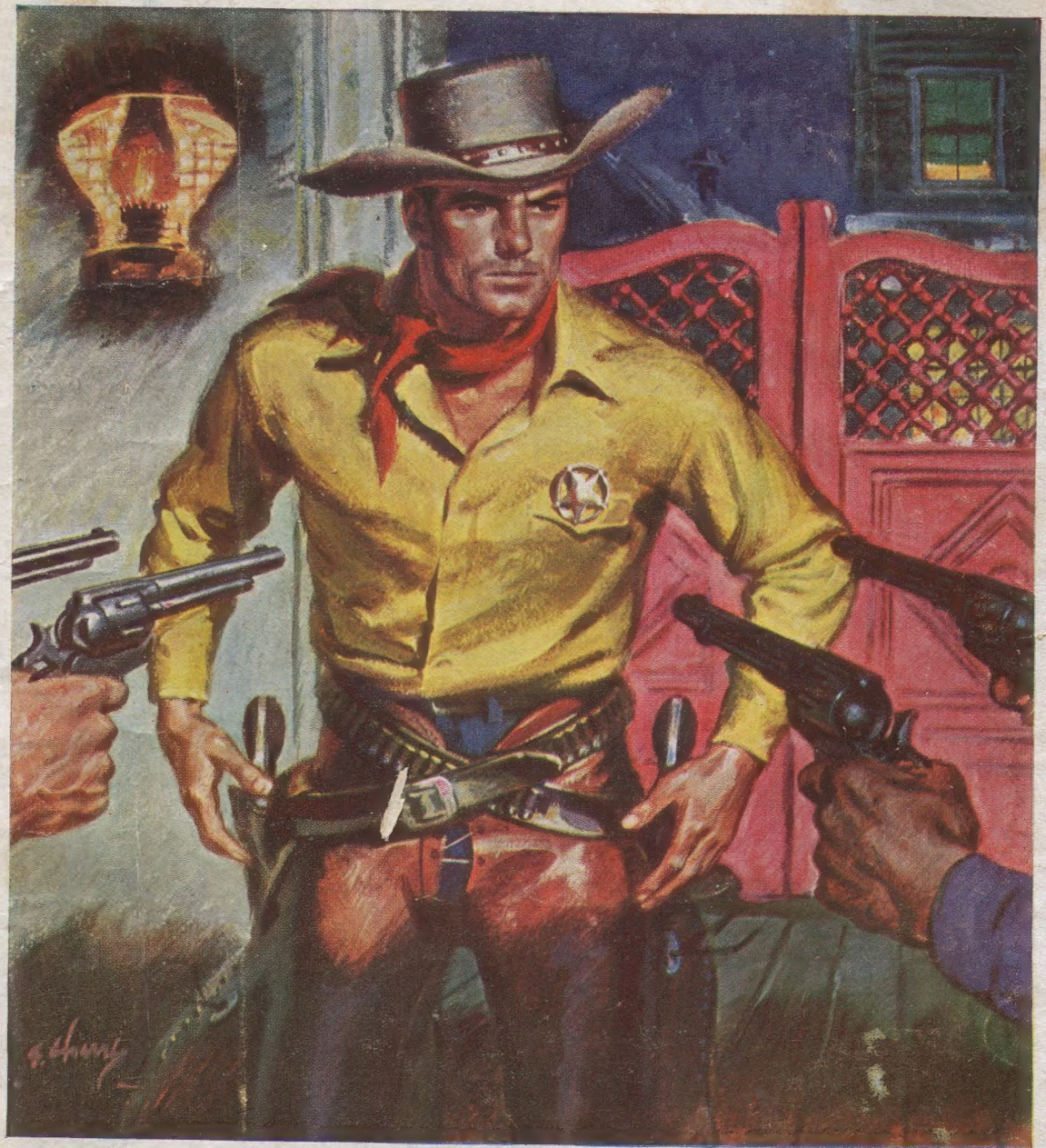
AUG.

20¢

A THRILL... PUBLICATION

TEXAS RANGERS



FEATURING:

RUSTLERS RIDE

A JIM HATFIELD ACTION NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

20¢ • BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES • TEXAS RANGERS • AUG. 1951

IS IT WRONG FOR A WHITE WOMAN TO GO NATIVE?

No woman has ever been so daring—or so damned!

A group of American and European exiles are stranded south of the border. Intrigue fills the air, passions that simmered in their hearts for years reach the boiling point, and adventure stands behind every shoulder. You'll do more than read this book, you'll *live* every exciting moment of...ADIOS, O'SHAUGHNESSY!

ORIGINAL-EDITION PRICE from $2.00 to $3.00

POPULAR LIBRARY REPRINT PRICE 25¢

ORIGINALLY SOLD FOR $3.00

ANY BEST-SELLING REPRINT ON THIS PAGE ONLY 25¢

RAMROD by Luke Short

Love and hate ride the Western range! A two-fisted cowboy has the battle of his life when he tries to defend his rights as a human being. Don't miss the surprise ending!

SHADOW OF A HERO by Allan Chase

An honest reporter faces death as he tries to expose an underworld hero whose passion is crime, whose friends are corrupt politicians!

SEASON FOR PASSION by Lee Manning

Was it love or lust that threw him into the arms of a native girl? The scene is war-time Korea where a crooked plot lures Alan Kirby into danger!

LIMITED SUPPLY...ORDER NOW!

POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., DEPT. TFG-8
10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N.Y.

Please send me the Popular Library Books I have checked. I enclose 25¢ (in coin or in U. S. stamps of small denominations) per copy. (We pay postage for orders of 4 books or more.) If ordering less than 4 books, please enclose 5¢ per book extra for postage.

- ☐ ADIOS, O'SHAUGHNESSY by Robert Tallman
- ☐ SHADOW OF A HERO by Allan Chase
- ☐ SEASON FOR PASSION by Lee Manning
- ☐ RAMROD by Luke Short

You'll want these exciting books, too (not shown):

- ☐ HOODLUM by Charley Robertson
- ☐ END OF TRACK by Ward Weaver
- ☐ CAMPUS TOWN by Hart Stilwell
- ☐ WHILE MURDER WAITS by John Esteven
- ☐ THE MAGNIFICENT COURTESAN by Lozania Prole
- ☐ BULLETS AT CLEARWATER by Edison Marshall

Cut out Coupon MAIL TODAY

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY & ZONE_____ STATE_____

Can you profit by their mistakes?

"What's your biggest mistake?" That's the question asked of American men and women in a national poll. Almost one out of every three who answered said, "*Not getting enough education.*"

You needn't make that mistake. Not when it's so easy to study with I. C. S. at home in your spare time.

The next biggest mistake, said the men, was "*Wrong choice of career.*"

Study with I. C. S. and you have over 400 courses to choose from. Part of our job here at I. C. S. is making sure that you pick the course that's right for you!

Number Three Mistake? "*Failed to seize opportunities.*"

Be sure to seize your opportunities. Be sure to fill out and mail the coupon below—*today!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

APPROVED under the G.I. BILL

BOX 3967-V, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ App. Psychology
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence
- ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ French
- ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing
- ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Prac. FM and Television
- ☐ Prac. Telephony
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake
- ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam and Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combus. Engrg.
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Power Plant Engr.
- ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Length of Service in World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 43, NO. 3 AUGUST, 1951

A New Complete Novel

RUSTLERS RIDE.....**Jackson Cole**
When a cattleman and a town boss waged a senseless feud, it took the Ranger savvy of Jim Hatfield to pin the deadwood on the real cause of the trouble

Two New Short Stories

STRANGER IN TOWN.....**Tom Curry** **82**
Tagged as a killer, the Roamin' Kid needs a friend

WIDELOOPER LUCK.....**Cibolo Ford** **92**
Gooble Nutter gets some help in handling his woes

Western Fiction Classics

OWLHOOT HUNCH.....**Leslie Ernenwein** **58**
Dude Mulqueen figured he owed Broken Bow plenty!

TRAITORS' BLOOD IS RED.....**Wayne D. Overholser** **68**
An exciting novelet of a westward vengeance trail

ALWAYS WANTING SOMETHING.....**Barry Scobee** **101**
Dicky Bradford didn't know he knew what he wanted

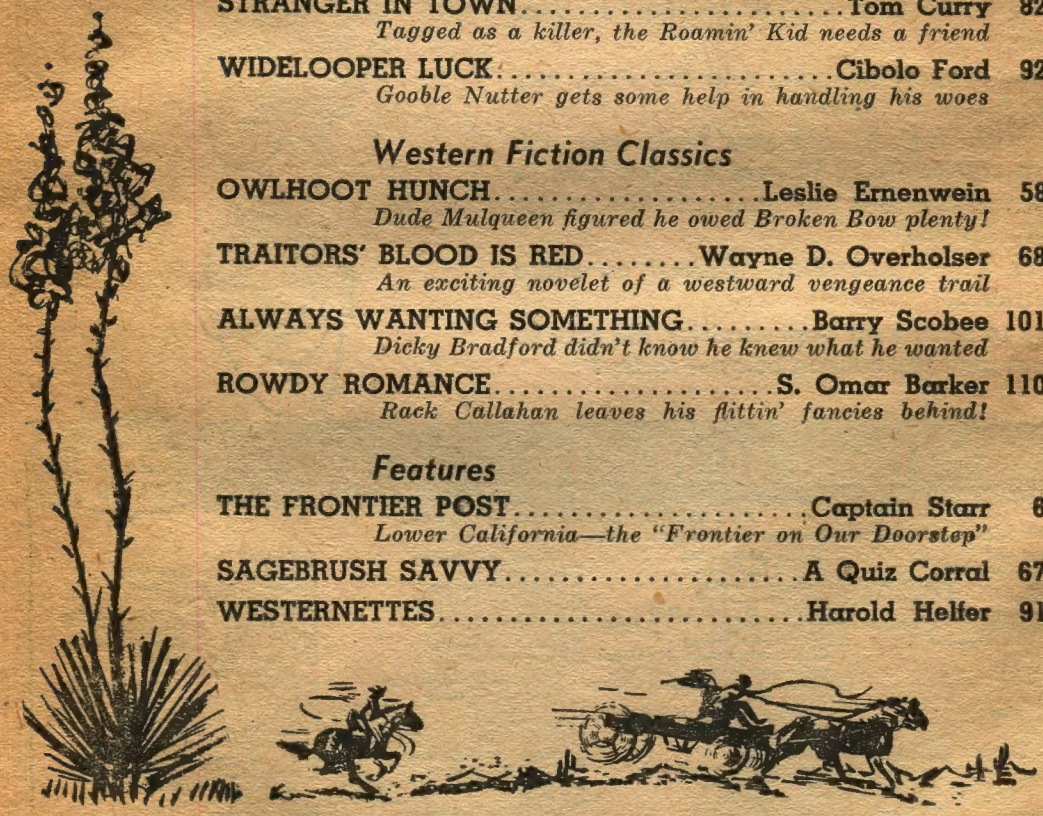
ROWDY ROMANCE.....**S. Omar Barker** **110**
Rack Callahan leaves his flittin' fancies behind!

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....**Captain Starr** **6**
Lower California—the "Frontier on Our Doorstep"

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....**A Quiz Corral** **67**

WESTERNETTES.....**Harold Helfer** **91**



"Owlhoot Hunch," Copyright, 1946, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in March, 1946, Rio Kid Western. "Traitors' Blood Is Red," Copyright, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in April, 1947, Thrilling Western. "Always Wanting Something," Copyright, 1945, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in January, 1946, Rio Kid Western. "Rowdy Romance," Copyright, 1936, by Beacon Magazines, Inc., and originally published in Dec., 1936, Popular Western.

TEXAS RANGERS. Published monthly by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription yearly $2.40; single copies 20c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter April 9, 1946, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1951, by Better Publications, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any real person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any.
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

A GOOD NEIGHBOR OF YOURS

HAS SIGNED THIS STATEMENT

Yes, Lee Dealers Coast-to-Coast say;
"Thank you, friends and neighbors, for your patronage. Today and always you can rely on the high quality of our merchandise and on our policy of sincere, helpful, service."

Your friendly Lee Dealer

There's a friendly Lee Dealer near you who has signed the statement above. Make his store your headquarters for all types of high quality merchandise.

There's a LEE for Every Job

Overalls • Jackets
Matched Shirts and Pants
Dungarees • Riders (Cowboy Pants for men, women and boys) • Rider Jackets
Union-Alls.

Lee
Highest Quality
WORK CLOTHES

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.

Kansas City, Mo. Minneapolis, Minn. Trenton, N. J.
San Francisco, Calif. South Bend, Ind.

COPYRIGHT, 1951
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

The FRONTIER POST

by CAPTAIN STARR

"Frontier on Our Doorstep"

TRAVELERS roam the wide world to bring us strange tales of faraway lands. But right on the doorstep of the United States, lies a wilderness as uninhabited as Tibet, as alluring as mythical Shangri-La and as primitive as the far West of covered wagon days.

Big things are happening there, on that "frontier on our doorstep," and I'm just back from a looksee so as to give you an eye-witness account of them.

But first, let's size up this enchanting old-new land on the map. The very name, Baja (Lower) California is so vaguely known that heaps of otherwise well-informed folks get it confused with Southern California, a part of our Golden State, instead of a territorial possession of Mexico, which it is.

Lower California is a long, thin peninsula that juts from the southwestern corner of U.S.A. for 750 miles, forming the Gulf of California along the west coast of Mexico.

It is from 30 to 150 miles wide, with an irregular coastline that forms many capes, bays and lagoons, fringed by numerous islands. A rugged Sierra forms the peninsula's backbone, rising to a height of 2000 to 5000 feet.

The mountains and arid plains are almost devoid of vegetation. In some parts not a drop of rain falls for several years at a stretch. There are no rivers worthy of the name, except the Colorado.

Not only is Lower California almost waterless, but it is practically roadless. Yes, there is a so-called road that winds for more than a thousand miles south of the border, to La Paz, near the tip. But it is far too rugged except for the most venturesome motorist. Only the first 70 miles, from Tijuana to Ensenada, is paved.

Another paved highway, recently finished, reaches 125 miles from Mexicali to San Felipe, a tiny fishing village on the gulf. The gulf region has tremendous possibilities as a vacationland.

Hunting and fishing are the main attractions. Ducks and geese flock to the Colorado estuary. There are fish of many kinds, both fresh water and salt. Deer, quail and wild pigeons are numerous.

But there are almost no tourist accommodations, not yet. Our southern neighbors are too busy putting the land under cultivation. It yields enormously of cotton, flax, alfalfa and winter vegetables. The delta soil is fabulously rich. I've seen tumbleweeds eight feet high that look like thriving young shade trees.

How can they raise crops without rain or water? The answer is, a treaty was made a few years ago, in which Washington granted to Mexico 1¼ million acre-feet of the annual flow of the Colorado. So the precious water is being put to use in an extensive irrigation system.

The new San Felipe highway pierces this delta area which used to be practically inaccessible. The old road was so bad that friendly Mexicans warned travelers by saying:

"Choose your rut carefully, senores, because you will be in it for the next 125 miles!"

I went camp-style on my San Felipe pasear, crossing the border at the twin cities of Calexico and Mexicali about noon on a warm winter day. I expected a rigid inspection at the Mexican customs and immigration station. But the only formality was one question: "Going fishing?"

"That's the main idea."

A friendly wave sent me on. No fee, no delay.

Mexicali consisted mainly of cantinas and curio shops. I was surprised at the change. Now it's a bustling, growing little cuidad,

full of new industries, including many cotton gins, all grouped along the Southern Pacific tracks that dip below the international boundary. These few miles of tracks are the only railroad in Lower California.

A stop at a gas station for a fill up. The price, 19c a gallon. Very same gas that cost 30c on the American side. Then off and away on the new, smooth pavement.

Only a few kilometers (the 3000-foot Mexican mile) and it seems that the calendar has turned back 50 years. The first thing that strikes you as different about the landscape is the lack of pole lines. No telefono, no telegrafico, no electric power. For 40 miles, immense green fields, cultivated by modern farm machinery. But no fine ranch homes, such as you see in Imperial Valley, to the north. The Mexican rancher hereabouts, though he owns big trucks, tractors and maybe a shiny new automobile, lives in a simple hovel.

At last, San Felipe. Whatever you might have expected, the first glimpse of this dismal village is a jolt. Beside the wide, blue gulf it squats in the blistered, glaring sand behind a rocky cape. It is so incredibly ugly that it's picturesque. The "plaza" is a bare salt flat, circled by low adobes and thatch shacks. Under a bluff along the shore, or at mooring in the tiny bay, is a fleet of small fishing boats. For San Felipe is a shrimp port. There is a small, crude ice plant where the camarrones are frozen and shipped by truck northward.

All at once, a wind rises. It's no ordinary desert blow, but a norther of furious force. It lifts the tops off of the dunes and hurls yellow sheets of sand across the wretched town. The brassy sky lowers and the tortured earth hurls itself up to meet it. The small population disappears, as though blown away. A knot of ragged, barefoot fishermen crawl under an upturned boat. These screaming winds come often to San Felipe. They may last an hour or a week. There are no trees or other greenery to halt it. Every drop of water is hauled 125 miles, so none is wasted. The patient, kindly natives are used to the weather whims of this harsh and hostile shore, and hole up like horned toads.

But not the turista, such as me. I screw my hat down tight, flatten my ears and buck it back to Rio Hardy Camp, where it's calm and comfortable. San Felipe some other time, with its wonderful shore and deep water fishing.

You bet, I'm going back. That "doorstep frontier" for me; when the sun swings south again I'm following it.

I hanker to spend a shirtsleeve Christmas down yonder.

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.

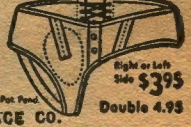
SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-851, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. HC-58, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Be a DETECTIVE
A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!
Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 198 Washington 18, D. C.

RUPTURE-EASER
FOR MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN
A strong, form fitting, washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after-operation support. Give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen. Specify right or left side or double. We pay postage except on COD's

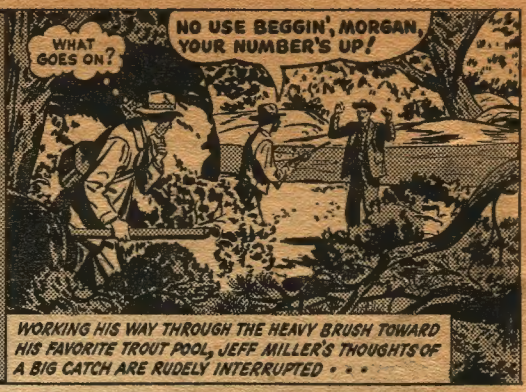


PIPER BRACE CO.
811 Wyandotte Dept. TF-81 Kansas City 6, Mo.

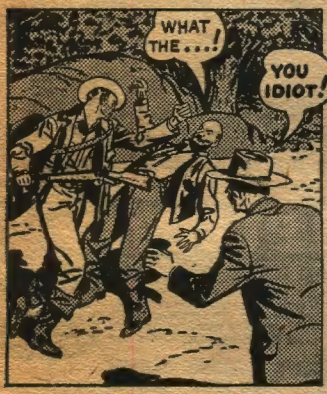
QUIT TOBACCO!
Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.
GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF. Ft. Worth 3, Texas

BE A Nurse
MAKE $50-$60 A WEEK
Practical nurses are needed in every community...doctors rely on them...patients appreciate their cheerful, expert care. You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. 52nd yr. Earn while learning. High School not required. Men, women, 18 to 60. Trial plan. Write now!
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 428, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name.....
City.....State.....Age.....

JEFF LOST INTEREST IN FISHING WHEN...



WORKING HIS WAY THROUGH THE HEAVY BRUSH TOWARD HIS FAVORITE TROUT POOL, JEFF MILLER'S THOUGHTS OF A BIG CATCH ARE RUDELY INTERRUPTED . . .



TO GET SLICK, REFRESHING SHAVES AT A SAVING, USE THIN GILLETTE BLADES. KEEN AND LONG LASTING, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE DISCOMFORT CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. BUY THIN GILLETTES IN THE TEN-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

RUSTLERS RIDE

When a cattleman and a town boss waged a senseless feud, it took Ranger savvy to pin the deadwood on the cause of the trouble

CHAPTER I

The Strike!

THE BUYER eyed old Cale Winton through the blue haze of his cigar. He appeared to be estimating the cattle baron, endeavoring, perhaps, to obtain

some inkling as to how his proposition would be received.

But Winton sat inscrutable as ever, not a muscle of his tanned, blocky face moving. His deep-set gray eyes were expressionless as they regarded the man before him. The buyer had an uneasy feeling that Winton was looking through him, rather than at him. He drew a deep breath and took the plunge.

"What I'm interested in most, Mr. Winton," he said, "what I'd like to get, is five thousand head of yearlings. I won't deny that my intention is to drive them north to the Panhandle country and there turn them over at a profit, something you could do yourself if you have a mind to."

Winton puffed on his own cigar. For the first time he seemed to really look at the man seated across the table. He blew out a cloud of smoke.

"What you do with 'em after you pay for 'em is your business," he said. "What color would you prefer?"

The buyer drew a deep breath. It was not unnatural that he was impressed. Those last words illustrated the vastness of Winton's holdings.

After the still somewhat dazed buyer departed, Winton sat by the open window, gazing across his broad acres, on which grazed considerably more than one hundred thousand cows. East, west, north and south from the great ranchhouse for many miles extended Winton's holdings, the far-flung X T spread. Winton had inherited the ranchhouse as it stood, from his father, but much of the land he had himself acquired over the course of the years.

The room in which Winton sat was in harmony with its owner. It was large and massive, beamed and paneled with everlasting oak, trimmed and shaped and smoothed by ax and draw-knife to a machinelike precision.

It gave the impression of extraordinary comfort and elegance combined with an atmosphere of masculine virility. It mingled the luxury of the wealthy man of some taste and the careless untidiness of the bachelor. Cale Winton had been a widower for nearly twenty-two years.

Contrasting a saddle in a corner, a buffalo gun resting across wooden pegs and a cartridge-belted Colt on the closed lid of the grand piano, on one wall hung a martial Giradet, opposite it a dreamy Turner. The paintings had been purchased and hung by Cale Winton's wife, dead now more than a score of years. Her own features gazed down at him from over the oaken mantel of the wide fireplace, and when Winton glanced up at the painting, his cold eyes would soften, and his stern old mouth would grow tender.

TERESA MARIA FLOR DIEGO, descendant of the conquistadores, had been a noted beauty when Cale Winton had met and married her. Her daughter, Mary, inherited the mother's small and beautifully formed body and her dark eyes. But, in striking contrast, she had Cale Winton's blond coloring and yellow hair. She had also inherited no small portion of the formidable Winton temper and unswerving tenacity of purpose.

Cale Winton was not thinking of his daughter, though, soon to be home from college, nor of the woman who had died to bring her into the world, as he gazed southward toward where a dark smudge fouled the clean blue of the Texas sky. Winton was thinking of what lay beneath that drifting cloud of smoke—the town of Tunis. His heavy, ridged brows drew together and a scowl darkened his face.

He was remembering a bright June day, nearly a year before. Tunis had drowsed comfortably in the sun, a sleepy cowtown of 'dobes and false fronts, with "Long John" Munzer's Last Chance Saloon with its story-and-a-half towering over the surrounding buildings like a moth-eaten swan amid a huddle of dilapidated ducks. Long hitch-racks lined the single street and at them stood about

a dozen somnolent horses. Their owners were in the Last Chance, sampling Long John's wares.

Southwest out of Tunis wound a trail that climbed ridges and dipped down sags until it reached the bleak-looking hills nearly a dozen miles distant. Over the shoulders of the hills reared mountains, with others looming still higher behind them. East, west, north and south, surrounding Tunis, was rangeland.

Northward toward Tunis, a wild-eyed rider urged a foaming horse to even

JIM HATFIELD

greater speed. The horse seemed to have caught some of its rider's excitement, for it snorted and blew and tossed its head as its hoofs drummed the ground.

The speeding horseman was the harbinger of a new era for a not inconsiderable section of southwest Texas. He was the first breath of a wind that would topple existing institutions, drastically change conditions and shake out of the complacency of years those who sat in the seats of power.

Not that the excited horseman was thinking of eras. He wouldn't have known what the word meant had he heard it. Like other makers of eras he was too busy thinking about himself and immediate matters to worry about history.

The citizens of Tunis were rudely jarred out of their leisurely routine by a clatter of hoofs, frenzied yells and the banging of a six-gun. Up the street galloped the horseman, whooping at the top of his voice and shooting into the air as fast as he could pull trigger. Opposite the open door of the Last Chance he swerved his lathered horse.

Inside the Last Chance, everything was peaceful. A dozen or so patrons, most of them cowhands from neighboring spreads, were sedately enjoying themselves. Some lined the bar with glasses in their hands. Others sat at a poker table and stared woodenly at their cards. They raised their heads inquiringly at the hullabaloo outside. The drinkers turned toward the door.

The door of the Last Chance was wide and high. Straight through it boomed the horseman. The horse's irons clanged and clattered on the floor as he was jerked to a slithering halt.

Peace in the Last Chance was a thing of the past. Over went the poker table, scattering cards and chips and players in wild confusion. The drinkers dodged this way and that to escape the splaying hoofs and the threat of the smoking six-gun. Remarkable profanity blued the air.

Long John Munzer let out a wrathful bellow. A bartender dived under the bar and came up with a sawed-off shotgun and the evident intention of using it.

But the horseman paid the wild confusion no mind. He uttered a soothing yell that quivered the hanging lamps and flopped from his saddle, waving a plump buckskin pouch. Before anybody could make a move, he upended the pouch on the bar. A flood of dull-colored lumps thudded solidly on the "mahogany."

"Acres of it!" bawled the owner of the

poke. "Miles of it! Plenty for everybody. Belly up, gents, I'm buyin' for the house. This is my night to howl! And I'm going to howl plenty!"

The shotgun clattered to the floor, forgotten, as the barkeep dived for one of the lumps. Breathing hard, he seized a knife and cut into it. There was no mistaking the yellow gleam that followed the stroke of the blade.

The poker players untangled themselves from their smashed chairs. Chips that stood for money lay ignored on the floor. A man who had been holding a straight

The bullet thudded into the back of the chair Hatfield had occupied the moment before

flush, to which he had clung during the turmoil, tossed the winning cards aside. John Munzer came up the bar with long strides. Men holding their breath crowded around the dirty and ragged prospector.

There is something about raw gold that seethes the blood, quickens the pulse beat and bates the breath. Men who would glance unconcernedly at a stack of coins feel their palms sweat and their lips dry at the sight of a handful of nuggets.

"For the love of cats, Pike, where'd you get it?" gulped the barkeep.

"Down in the Camina Hills!" panted the prospector. "Them gravel flats under the cliffs are salted with the stuff. All you need to do is pull up the grass roots and find nuggets clingin' to 'em. There's acres of it, I said, miles of it. There's plumb plenty for everybody in town. Soon as I have a few drinks and somethin' to eat I'll lead you fellers down there and you can locate your claims. Gents, this town is goin' to be rich! Belly up, I said. Pour 'em, Carney, and keep 'em comin'!"

Carney, the bartender, set bottles on the bar and shucked off his apron.

"Pour your own drink, gents," he said. "I'm gettin' ready to trail along with Pike."

"Take it easy," said the prospector, who was cooling to his ordinarily practical self. "Take it easy. There ain't no hurry. It's only about ten miles down the trail and the stuff won't run away. I won't be ready to trail for another couple of hours. Take it easy, and down your pizen."

He gulped a drink, strode over to where John Munzer stood, and clapped him on

the back with assured familiarity.

"I done took care of you, John," he said. "You was always a square-shooter with everybody. You give me credit when I didn't have a peso, and didn't know where to find one. I didn't forget. I staked out your claim right alongside mine, what I figured to be the best pickin's. I posted the location notice and brought in copies to file at the minin' recorder's office. Get ready to go along with me. To hell with this dump!"

But John Munzer, a far-sighted look in his deep-set eyes, slowly shook his head as he examined one of the nuggets.

"I'm goin' to stay here, Pike," he said. "I'm plumb obliged to you for what you did. You work both claims and we'll go fifty-fifty on what the one in my name turns out."

He drew the miner to one side.

"Pike," he said in lower tones, "if this thing turns out to be what it looks like, the real gold mine is right here in Tunis. This stuff you've got, never traveled far, from the look of it. The edges of the hunks are still sharp. I figure it all came from the cliffs above those flats. There must be ledges up there, perhaps the sort that goes on payin' for years.

"Look into that angle, Pike, when you get back to the hills. Locate a ledge if you can. Don't put it off, for when the news of this thing gets about, there'll be folks pilin' in from everywhere, some of 'em folks who know all the minin' angles. They'll know these lumps come from a mother lode nearby.

"I'm stayin' here to get somethin' worth while organized. If this strike is real, and I reckon it is, this town is goin' to boom. I'm goin' to stake a claim right here, and I'll cut you in on it just like you cut me in on yours. We'll talk about it later. Finish up what you got to do here and get goin' 'fore the boys bust a cinch. Come and talk with me soon as you get back."

"Sure, John," said the prospector. "You got judgment. By the way, here's the first nugget I dug up. Funny shape, ain't it? Almost like a star. Want it for a souvenir?" He held out the lump.

"I'll take it," said Munzer. "I'll have it framed and hang it over the bar in—our new place."

CHAPTER II

Gold and Guns

BEFORE an hour had passed, Tunis was a ghost town, so far as the male population was concerned. Every man in town, including the cowhands who had been drinking in the Last Chance, had followed Pike Causey to the gravel flats down in the Camina Hills.

That is, every man except Long John Munzer. He sat in the deserted saloon, deep in thought. Finally he entered the back room, opened a ponderous iron safe and took out several thick packets of notes of large denominations. He slipped them carelessly in his pocket, closed the safe, locked up the saloon, went out and got the rig on his horse.

Then he rode away for a visit with old Fletcher Bartlett, owner of the Double Circle Ranch. He crossed the broad mesquite flats extending south from Tunis, flats that were part of Fletcher Bartlett's holdings.

Fletcher Bartlett was a happy-go-lucky old fellow who raised enough cows to keep him in food and whisky and an occasional new pair of overalls. When Munzer arrived at the Double Circle, he told old Bartlett at once about Pike Causey's strike.

"And it's because of it I'm here," he concluded. "I got a proposition to make, Fletcher. I know you've had a hankerin' to sell out for quite a spell. I'm here to make you an offer."

He laid the packets of notes between them on the table as he spoke.

"But I'm puttin' all the cards on the table," he went on. "I'm willin' to gamble that Pike Causey's strike is the real thing. If it is, Tunis is goin' to boom, is goin'

tc grow and spread out like blazes. And the only place it's got to spread on is the mesquite flats to the south. On all other sides are the cliffs and bad ground. If my hunch is a straight one, and I believe it is, those flats are goin' to be mighty valuable, and I got a chance to make a heap of *dinero*.

"But it's up to you. If you want to gamble on it, hold onto 'em and you'll be the one to make the big pile. If you'd rather take what I offer, all right. There's a few thousand dollars there on the table —about half of what I've been able to save during the past twenty years. I'm willin' to gamble it. If my hunch ain't straight, I lose. As I said, it's up to you."

Bartlett stroked his white beard, and smiled.

"John," he said, "I know you're a square-shooter. Everybody knows that. Not many folks would come and tell it straight to me like you just did. Me, I'm a mite too old to gamble. Besides, I don't hanker for a lot of money. With what you're offering me for my place, I can go back to the Brazos country, to my boy there. He owns a general store and he's writ me lots of time, beggin' me to come and live with him. But I never would 'cause I didn't want to be a burden on nobody. Now I can spend what few years I got left with him and his kids. The way it stands, I figure I'm gettin' what I hanker for, and I hope it works out so you'll get what you want. It's a deal."

They shook hands on it and filled their pipes.

"Just one thing," said Bartlett, through a cloud of smoke. "I want you to promise to look after my cow critters. Don't let 'em go hungry if a blizzard happens to come along, and see that the water-holes are dug out in dry weather. I wouldn't feel right if I thought they wasn't cared for proper. If you sell 'em to be made into beefsteaks, that's all right. That's the natural and happy endin' for a cow critter, to be made into beefsteaks. But while they're livin' I want 'em to live comfortable."

"I'll do it," said Munzer. "I'll look after 'em, or sell the spread, 'ceptin' the mesquite flats, to somebody who can use it and will look after 'em."

"Good," said Bartlett. "I'm takin' along my houn' dog and my old Sharpes buffalo gun. The rest I'm leavin' as is. . . ."

TWO DAYS later, Fletcher Bartlett pulled out for the Brazos country. But even before that Pike Causey's strike had proved to be the real thing.

The population of Tunis jumped from a few dozen to a few thousand. The mesquite flats, now owned by John Munzer, were in an amazingly short time dotted with buildings. Most elaborate was the structure that housed Munzer's new Lucky Star Saloon with plate-glass windows, a mirror-blazing back bar, roulette wheels, dance floor, lunch counter, faro bank and poker tables.

Before long the smoke of the stamp mills that ground the ore taken from the ledges above the gravel banks stained the blue of the sky. And John Munzer was Tunis' first citizen, with his partner, Pike Causey, second in affluence.

Close on the heels of miners, shopkeepers, mill workers and other reputable citizens came the inevitable camp followers of a strike—card sharps, dance hall women, keepers of shady dives. Tunis changed from a sleepy little hamlet to a hell town to rival Tombstone, Dodge City or Tascosa.

Owlhoot depredations increased sharply in the section. Enterprising gents of easy conscience twirled wide loops. Others of similar ilk specialized in holdups. Killings became fairly commonplace.

All of which did not set well with Cale Winton of the great X T ranch. Winton hated the town and he hated John Munzer. He had never liked Munzer who, he felt, had always failed to accord him the respect he, Winton, believed due the richest and most influential citizen of that end of the state.

Winton had liked Fletcher Bartlett, whom he had known for forty years. Knowing nothing of the details of the transaction, he was sure Munzer had

euchered the old man out of a fortune. Those who did know about the deal, having been informed by Bartlett himself before he departed, declared vigorously it was not so. Munzer, a taciturn individual, did not take the trouble either to affirm or deny. Cale Winton believed what he wanted to believe.

Then to set Winton more on the prod, along came Milt Sander.

Milt Sander was a tall, broad-shouldered, craggy-featured man of about thirty, apparently a man of some education. He had pale blue eyes, unruly dark hair and wore a heavy black beard which was pretty well sprouted when he arrived in Tunis, and which he had never taken the trouble to shave. Doubtless for sufficient reasons of his own, as Winton spitefully observed.

Sander showed up in Tunis a few months after the boom got under way. He drank in the Lucky Star and struck up an acquaintance with John Munzer.

"Owned a little spread over in the Nueces country," he confided to the saloon owner. "Got tired of fightin' droughts and sold out. Drifted over this way, figurin' I might be able to tie onto somethin' in a better climate."

"Sort of in the cow business myself, though I don't hanker to be," Munzer returned, with a chuckle.

"How's that?" Sander asked, showing quick interest.

Munzer told him. Sander's interest grew.

"How'd you like to sell that ranch and the cows?" he asked. "I got a few pesos."

"Would be all right with me," Munzer declared. "I got my hands full here in town without botherin' about Fletcher Bartlett's cows. If you're a cowman, you ought to do all right. There's a market right here in town for about all you can raise. I sort of got a hand in most things hereabouts and I'll see to it the boys buy from you."

The deal was quickly consummated. Soon Sander began selling beef to the Tunis slaughterhouses. He brought in more cows, not taking the trouble to explain where he got them. He also brought in his own hands.

CALE WINTON stopped at the Double Circle ranchhouse to warn Sander against the machinations of John Munzer, and got a cold reception for his pains. He rode off in a rage.

"The hellion is hand-in-glove with Munzer and his crooked deals, I'll bet a hatful of pesos!" Winton stormed to other ranch owners. "No wonder everybody's losin' cows of late. He's got a bunch of hard-lookin' characters ridin' for him, too."

Cale Winton was thinking of these things now after the cattle buyer had left him, as he sat glowering out the window. Suddenly, however, his face brightened. A horseman was riding up the gravel road that wound across the ranchhouse yard. Winton recognized Arch Haley who owned the Rocking H, a small spread to the northwest of the X T. Winton liked Haley, who often came to him for advice on ranching matters, a habit that pleased the old cattle baron.

Arch Haley was a slender young man, though broad-shouldered enough. His slenderness was the tempered slimness of a rapier blade and there was a glint in his dark eyes like a blade point in the sun. He had brown hair inclined to wave, a firm mouth, and rather swarthy coloring. His face was handsome in a smooth and polished way, with only the slight curve of his well-shaped nose hinting at power. He had the reputation of being a good cowman and well able to take care of himself in a ruckus. "Mighty fast on the draw and plumb accurate," said those who had seen him in action.

Haley had come to this range from Arizona a year before the Tunis gold strike to help his uncle, old Courtney Haley, run the Rocking H. Six months after his arrival, Courtney Haley had died, leaving the property to his nephew. The Rocking H was mortgaged, but the industrious Arch Haley had managed to pay off the note when it fell due, rather to the surprise of his neighbors, for old Courtney had let the Rocking H run down con-

siderably before his nephew arrived on the scene.

This feat on the part of Arch Haley pleased Cale Winton, who admired shrewdness in monetary matters, so long as it did not run counter to his own interests.

"Well, how are things, suh?" Haley asked respectfully as he unforked.

" 'Bout as common," growled Winton, his face darkening again. "Still losin' cows. I can afford it, but just the same it makes me madder'n hell. I don't take kind to bein' robbed."

"I've been losin' some, too, and I can't afford it," Haley replied grimly.

"Well, you'll keep on losin' 'em, afford it or not, and so will everybody else so long as that cussed town down there keeps pullin' in the owlhoot brand from all over the Southwest!" Winton snorted.

Haley nodded soberly. "The Camina stage was lobbed last night," he informed. "They got nigh onto ten thousand dollars in gold and killed the driver and wounded the guard bad. That's four holdups in the past six weeks, not countin' the express car robbery over by Creston. Sheriff Hauser rode over to Camina."

"He might as well ride 'round my barns, for all the good he'll do," growled Winton. "That's somethin' else that infernal town is responsible for. Fixed it so Tom Hauser could nose out Sheriff Blake in the election. Blake was a good man."

"You always pick good men for office," Haley agreed. "I'm afraid Hauser don't over exert himself when it comes to runnin' down owlhoots."

WINTON nodded approval.

"Where you headed for, Arch?" he asked.

"Town," replied the young man. "Thought maybe you might like to ride in with me."

"I ain't got no use for the darn town, but I'll come along," Winton grunted. "Just made a good deal with a buyer. Sold him five thousand head of year-old stuff. Might as well bank the money."

He whooped for his horse, which a wrangler speedily brought, and the two rode off together, Haley listening in silence as Winton held forth on the untoward conditions on the range.

"Owlhoots!" he snorted. "They're ridin' in from every direction in streams. We're gettin' the cream of the crop of the whole Southwest! The country ain't fit to live in any more, and all because of the dadgummed gold strike. I wish Pike Causey had gone and lost himself in the desert before he ever showed up here!"

There was a slightly amused expression in Haley's face as he listened to Winton's diatribe, but he nodded serious agreement to everything the older man said.

CHAPTER III

Dead Shot

HALEY rode lance-straight in his saddle, his feet thrust deep into the stirrups, his seat that of a cavalryman rather than a cowhand. But Winton lounged atop his big bay with the careless grace of a lifetime in the hull, one leg hooked comfortably over the horn.

About three miles north of Tunis the trail forked, one branch coming in from the west. As the two cattlemen neared the forks, they observed a single horseman approaching from the west. They eyed him with interest.

He was an unusually tall man, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, with the slim, sinewy waist and flat hips of perfect physical condition. His dimpled "J.B.," pushed back from his broad forehead, revealed thick, crisp hair so black that a blue shadow seemed to lie upon it. His lean, deeply bronzed face was dominated by a pair of long eyes of a peculiar shade of green. He had a hawk nose, a rather wide mouth, grin-quirked at the corners, and a powerful jaw and chin.

"Another one, I'll bet my last peso," Winton rumbled disgustedly. "Looks like the big skookum he-wolf of the pack. Look

at them eyes! A two-gun man, too."

"But that horse!" returned Haley. "If that isn't the finest golden sorrel I ever saw. Must be all of eighteen hands high!"

The tall horseman was less than a score of paces distant. Winton had hitched his leg a little higher over the horn and leaned forward for a better look at him when from the edge of the trail came a lethal buzz.

Winton's horse shied violently, stepped on a rolling stone and almost fell. The abrupt lurch caught Winton off-balance and hurled him from the saddle. He hit the ground hard, his face within a foot of the enraged rattlesnake lying in its loose coils at the edge of the trail, its raised tail a buzzing blur.

Haley gasped, and went for his gun. But before it cleared leather, a booming report quivered the air. The head of the snake vanished. The decapitated body thrashed about, to expire with hideous convulsive writhings. Arch Haley, gripping his still holstered gun, pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. There was an inscrutable look in his intent black eyes as he stared at the horseman.

Winton rolled away from the dying reptile and lurched to his feet. His face was paper-white and he was shaking in every limb. Cale Winton hated snakes, and aside from his loathing for the squirmy devils, he knew well that the stroke of a big rattler, in the face, is no light matter. He stared at the rider of the golden horse, who had ejected the spent shell from his long-barreled Colt and was calmly replacing it with a fresh cartridge from his double belts.

"M-much obliged, feller," Winton said heavily. "Reckon you saved my bacon." He added, with more animation, "And that was shootin'! Many's the time I've tried to shoot a snake's head off, but I never could do it."

"His head was up and he was stiff," the tall rider deprecated the feat in a deep, musical voice, a fitting voice to come out of his great chest. "They're always like that just before they lash out. Just a matter of timin'."

"Uh-huh, so I gather," Winton agreed drily. "And I got a notion anything you throw down on is sort of stiff—right afterward."

The rider of the golden sorrel laughed, his even teeth flashing startlingly white against his bronzed cheeks. Winton chuckled, a trifle shakily. He strode forward, stuck out a huge paw.

"I'm Cale Winton," he introduced himself. "This feller with me is Arch Haley."

"Hatfield's my name," said the stranger. "Front handle's sort of been whittled down to Jim in the past thirty years. Glad to know you folks." He extended a slim-fingered, sinewy hand to meet Winton's.

CALE WINTON had a ponderous handshake, the sort calculated to impress with the power of his arm and the strength of his personality. But as Hatfield's fingers coiled about his, it was Winton who winced slightly.

A faint smile passed across Arch Haley's handsome face. He also shook hands, his grip casual.

With a glance at the dead snake, and a slight shudder, Cale Winton swung into his hull with a litheness that might well have been envied by a man half his age.

"We were headed for town," he volunteered.

"Reckon I'm headed the same way," Hatfield replied. "Called Tunis, ain't it?"

"That's right," grunted Winton. "Used to be a nice little pueblo, but now it's a blasted hell-hole. But it's the only town within twenty miles, so we ain't got much choice in the matter."

Hatfield's level green eyes rested on Winton's face a moment, but he proffered no comment. The shadowy smile drifted across Arch Haley's lips again, and his glance was amused as he met Hatfield's. They rode on to town.

Despite his hatred for John Munzer, Winton patronized the Lucky Star. Partly because it was the most orderly in town; more because to stay away would be to confer on Munzer a certain importance through the assumption that he was worthy of notice. Winton maintained that

such subspecies of the human race as the saloon man were below his mental horizon. He had no intention of letting John Munzer swim above it.

Hatfield, who had listened to a verbal castigation of Munzer in the course of the ride to town, surveyed the first citizen of Tunis with interest. Munzer, he thought, had the appearance of being an able and adroit man. That he possessed vision and imagination was implied by his acquiring the land on which the town was largely built.

Until Hatfield had heard both sides of the question, he was not ready to concur with Winton's assumption that Munzer had practically defrauded the original owner of his holdings. He was forced to admit that Munzer did not look like that sort. But the green-eyed man on whom a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers had conferred the title of "Lone Wolf" knew that outward appearances are often deceptive, and he reserved judgment on Munzer until he knew more about him.

"Here comes Munzer's pard," Winton suddenly growled. "Milt Sander."

Hatfield gazed at the new arrival who was walking along the bar from the door. He was a tall man, carelessly dressed in cowhand garb. He had pale eyes and a rather unkempt black beard. As he neared, his cold eyes slid over Winton's face with something like contempt. Also ignored was Arch Haley.

Abruptly Sander's glance focused on Hatfield. His eyes narrowed as if in perplexity, he half halted in his stride. Instantly, however, he recovered and passed by without a word, pausing beside John Munzer at the far end of the bar.

"Now what?" Hatfield wondered. "Jigger acted sort of like he thought he knew me. I wonder!"

Neither Winton nor Haley appeared to have noticed the incident.

Hatfield set his empty glass on the bar. "Think I'll go and stable my horse," he said. "Much obliged for the drink, suh."

Cale Winton had an engaging smile when he chose to use it. Now it lighted his bad-tempered old face.

"It's up to me to do any thinkin' that's done around here, son," he said. "By the way"—he glanced at Hatfield's rangeland clothing—"chuck-line ridin'?"

"Sort of," Hatfield replied.

"Well," said Winton, "if you've a mind to stop, right here's the place. I'd take it a plumb favor if you'd ride for me."

"And I take it a plumb compliment that you asked me, suh," Hatfield instantly returned. "Maybe I'll take you up on it."

WINTON stuck out his hand and they shook cordially, smiling into each other's eyes.

"Just follow the trail north to get to my place," said Winton. "You can't miss it."

As he followed the Lone Wolf's towering form with his eyes, he said to Arch Haley:

"A tophand or I'm a heap mistook!"

"Wouldn't be surprised," agreed the observant Haley, "but he hasn't worked at it for a spell. No mark of rope or branding' iron on his hands. But," he added significantly, "there are calluses on

[Turn page]

RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN FAST

Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.

the thumbs and first fingers of both hands. I've a notion that big gent practices the draw considerable."

"Anybody who saw him shoot that infernal snake's head off wouldn't have to be told that," grunted Winton. "But be that as it may, I'm sure beholden to him. I figured I was a goner when I was lookin' that fangin' devil in the eye."

He shuddered with recollection. Haley nodded gravely, but did not make any comment.

Hatfield located a livery stable without difficulty and turned his horse over to the care of a crusty but efficient-looking old stable keeper. He made sure that all the sorrel's wants were provided for before going down the street to seek something to eat himself.

"Looks to be an interesting section, Goldy," he told the horse, as he rubbed the sorrel down. "Got a notion we'll do a mite of business around here before we pull out."

Goldy said nothing, and munched his oats.

Hatfield decided that the Lucky Star was as good a place to eat as any, having noted that tables were provided for the accommodation of those who wished to enjoy greater ease than the lunch counter afforded. So he strolled back to the saloon.

Winton and Haley had already departed when he arrived, and Milt Sander was not in evidence. John Munzer nodded to Hatfield as he entered, and the Lone Wolf smiled and nodded back.

LOCATING a vacant table, he sat down and gave his order to a waiter. John Munzer strolled over and paused at the table. There was a twinkle in his deep-set eyes as he regarded Hatfield.

"Well, after a pow-wow with Cale Winton, I reckon you figure I'm a grand old rascal, eh?" he remarked with a humorous chuckle.

Hatfield smiled, and shook his head.

"Not in the habit of judging a man from somebody else's say-so," he replied. "I've noticed that when folks have a disagreein', they sometimes think, and say, hard things about the other feller. Two people may be the best in the world but not able to see things eye to eye. I'll take you and Winton both on face value till I learn more about you. Then I'll form my own opinion."

"I work about the same way," Munzer agreed soberly. "Found it pays off. Cale Winton is a purty good feller, but he's been used to havin' his own way and runnin' things for a long spell. He sort of jumps at conclusions and goes off half-cocked. But show him for sure he's wrong, and he's the first to admit it."

"A good characteristic in any man," Hatfield replied. "Is Haley related to him?"

"Nope," Munzer said, "though Winton seems to think considerable well of him. Haley is a hard worker and Winton likes that. He took that run-down spread and made it into a payin' proposition mighty fast. Place never amounted to shucks when his uncle, old Courtney Haley, had it. Courtney was easy goin' and I reckon didn't care much, so long as he had just enough to get along on.

"Arch is different. He took hold when he come back from Arizona and within a year had the mortgage paid off and the place in good shape. Reckon he takes after his dad, Courtney's younger brother. Courtney and Porter Haley, Arch's dad, never got along together too well. Finally had a split and Porter sold out to Courtney and moved west. He wasn't a steady goin' feller like old Courtney and had a habit of gettin' into ruckuses. Understand he was killed in one in Arizona. Never heard the particulars of the business, though.

"Happened a year or so before Arch came back to Texas. Arch was just a tad when his dad moved west. Old Courtney, his uncle, always sort of took to him when he was a little feller, so folks say. Courtney never married. Reckon he was glad to have Arch come back to live with him. He was already ailin' at the time and didn't last much longer after Arch come back."

CHAPTER IV

Cantina Ambush

HATFIELD nodded as Munzer came to the end of his long-winded neighborhood gossip.

"Winton and Haley pulled out while I was stablin' my horse," he remarked.

"Uh-huh," said Munzer. "Winton don't ever stay here long. Reckon he just comes in to show me he'll go anywhere he has a mind to. Never has more than a couple of drinks, then ambles out to gab with some of his cronies down to the general stores and such. Reckon Haley headed for *La Golondrina*, down the street, to play poker. He likes cards and they have some big games there."

"The Swallow," Hatfield translated. "Not a bad name for a saloon."

"Reckon so," agreed Munzer. "I don't go much for *La Golondrina*. But reckon I'm gettin' old and sort of lost my taste for shindigs and such. As I said, they have some purty stiff games down there. And plenty of gals and dancin'. Mostly cowhands and fellers sort of ridin' through hang out in *La Golondrina*. It's down to the end of the street, where the bridge crosses the crik to the mills. The crik ain't much, but the gully it runs in is wide and deep, so when the stamp mills were built, they threw a good bridge across. Sort of makes a short cut to the mines. They built a road that joins the Camina Trail farther south, too. Well, be seein' you, son. Got to look after business."

Hatfield finished his meal, then strolled out to look the town over. He found Tunis busy and interesting. There were plenty of saloons and gambling houses scattered among the shops that lined C Street, the street on which Munzer's place was located, and which had supplanted the original main street as the town's principal thoroughfare. Hatfield strolled along, glancing in windows, pausing now and then at one of the bars for a look-see.

As he walked, the buildings grew fewer, the lighting less adequate. He realized that he was drawing toward the bridge by way of which the street crossed the creek to the mills. The rumbling mutter of the stamps quivered the air with their monotonous and unceasing pound.

Hatfield decided to have a look at *La Golondrina*, the saloon at the end of the street which apparently had a somewhat dubious reputation. He quickened his pace slightly. The street was now practically deserted and a couple of hundred yards ahead loomed an open space where there were no buildings.

To men who ride much alone, with danger as a constant stirrup companion, there comes a subtle sixth sense that often warns of menace when none is obviously present. This sense was highly developed in the Lone Wolf.

Abruptly, for no apparent good reason, he became acutely uneasy. Nothing stirred amid the shadows ahead. The rows of buildings flanking the street were silent and to all appearances deserted. He glanced right and left, peered ahead. Instinctively, however, he refrained from turning.

Across the street were warehouses, their dark windows like hollow eyes. And those windows, some of them set at an angle, provided good substitutes for mirrors. Hatfield's gaze fixed on them as he strolled slowly along.

At first he saw nothing. Then, outlined shadowy in the glass he noted the forms of five men who were walking the street some distance behind. They walked in a close group and their attention appeared to be centered on something ahead of them.

Hatfield paused to gaze at the window display of a closed shop. From the tail of his eye he saw that the five men paused to gaze into another. When he moved on, they also moved. He quickened his pace. The others quickened theirs. When he slowed down, they slowed down.

"Tailing me, all right," he muttered. "Now what's in the wind?"

He had almost reached the dark open space. Ahead, at a distance of perhaps fifty yards, was a building with light gleaming from the windows. Doubtless *La Golondrina,* for directly beyond the structure, Hatfield could just make out the shadowy loom of the bridge.

SUDDENLY he quickened his pace, his long legs covering the ground at an astonishing rate, although he was not really running. His keen ears caught the sound of beating feet behind him.

"Thought so," he grunted, increasing his stride still more. "Figured to close in on me in the dark. Well, we'll just put a crimp in that little notion."

He realized that the men behind him were running now, swiftly closing the distance. But directly in front of him was *La Golondrina.* With the apparent pursuit still fifty yards or so in the rear, he swerved sideward and through the swinging doors of the saloon, instantly curbing his speed to a leisurely saunter.

Hatfield spotted a vacant table near an open window and sat down. He was rolling a cigarette when the five men entered, breathing hard and glancing keenly about. They moved to the bar and ordered drinks, their heads drawing together over their glasses.

One of them, Hatfield noted, was tall and gangling, with bony features and a wide, reptilian slit of a mouth. Another was short and broad, with long, dangling arms. The other three were of medium height, with no outstanding physical characteristics.

"Salty hombres, all right," was Hatfield's mental decision. "Look to be cowhands, but I'll bet they haven't been for quite a spell."

While keeping an eye on the ominous quintette at the bar, he gave the room a careful once-over.

La Golondrina was not a large place and not crowded. It was apparently a one-room cantina. If it boasted a back room, the door leading to it was not conspicuously in evidence. There was a dance floor and a three-piece Mexican orchestra. The dance floor girls were good-looking and bold, and had calculating eyes.

Their costumes were not readily described through masculine eyes. In fact there wasn't enough to them to merit expansive description. However, both girls and costumes seemed to suit *La Golondrina* patrons, for the girls did not lack partners.

The room was lighted by two hanging lamps, one near the bar and the other casting its beams over a couple of big poker tables near the center of the room. The building, Hatfield had seen from the outside, was built close to the creek bank. Its back, in fact, was supported by stout wooden piling.

A game was in progress at one of the poker tables, and the tenseness of the players evidenced that the stakes were high. Of the seven players, three had the appearance of being well-to-do ranch owners. Three more were evidently mill or mine owners. The seventh was Arch Haley.

Haley's face was calm, his hands steady, but the glitter of his black eyes had intensified.

"Likes the game and knows how to play it," Hatfield deduced. "A tough customer to go up against at cards, I'd say."

As he sat sipping the drink he ordered, it seemed to Hatfield that there was also a certain tenseness at the bar. The five men had edged along it until they were directly in line with where he sat, with the dance floor on one side and the poker tables on the other, flanking an open lane from the bar to the table he occupied.

The lone bartender, a swarthy, hard-eyed and alert-looking individual, apparently knew the five men. He exchanged remarks with them, then moved to the end of the bar, where he stood polishing glasses.

The other bar patrons appeared to have conceived an idea for bunching together. They had crowded away from the five men at the bar, leaving room on either side.

Hatfield knew that the five men were

watching him in the back bar mirror. However, he sat unconcerned, his eyes apparently fixed on the poker game.

AN ARGUMENT started. The voices of the five at the bar raised. They gesticulated angrily. Suddenly the short man bellowed a curse and leaped back toward the middle of the floor, almost directly in line with where Hatfield sat. His hand dropped to his belt.

Instantly the tall man who was facing him angrily, went into action. He jerked his gun and lined sights in the direction of his short companion.

And as instantly, Jim Hatfield went sideward from his chair to the floor even as the gangling man pulled trigger and the bullet thudded into the back of the chair Hatfield had occupied the second before.

Prone on the floor, Hatfield drew and fired from the hip, two reports from his guns blending as one. With a clang-jangle of breaking glass the two hanging lamps went out. Black darkness blanketed the room.

Hatfield rolled over with a sideward, slithering motion. Guns roared across the room and lead hissed through the air to thud solidly into the wall behind him. He blazed two shots in reply and heard a howl of pain and a sound as of a body thrashing about. That sound was instantly drowned by the pandemonium that broke loose. Men were yelling and cursing. The dance girls were screaming. The orchestra screeched frightened Spanish. A table crashed to the floor and the curses of the poker players added to the tumult.

Hatfield came to his feet like a released spring. His guns boomed again, the muzzles tipped up. The back bar mirror crashed to splintered ruin. Hatfield holstered one gun and side-stepped along the wall, groping in the darkness. His hand encountered a chair and he hurled it at the dimly outlined opening above the swinging doors. The doors banged open under the impact.

"There he goes!" a voice bawled. "Out the door! After him!"

There was a pounding of boots, a crackle of shots, with no more bullets coming in Hatfield's direction.

Hatfield was going, all right, but not through the door. He was going through the open window; feet first. He hit the ground outside, staggered, regained his balance and raced toward the rear of the building. The next instant he was crouched under the overhang of the building, gripping a piling to keep his balance on the sloping creek bank.

The night air was quivering to angry voices tossing questions back and forth. Hatfield groped about on the ground until he found a loose stone. With all his strength he tossed it toward the bridge across the gully, which was only a few yards distant. The stone hit the floor and went bounding along, giving a creditable imitation of boots pounding the boards.

"He's on the bridge!" somebody bellowed.

Hatfield saw dark figures flashing past in the starlight. Boots pounded the floor boards of the bridge. More shots were fired. The tumult outside died away in the direction of the grumbling stamp mills on the far bank of the creek.

But there was still plenty going on inside *La Golondrina*. All the girls seemed to be squawking at once, like so many hawk-pounced chickens. Men's voices cursed and boomed. There was a sound of breaking furniture, indicating that perhaps a private fight or two had started between irritated customers. A thrown bottle hurtled through the open window. Inside, more glass splintered. Hatfield chuckled, edged from under the overhang, and cautiously raised his head above the lip of the bank.

Standing within arm's reach was a man who peered downward. Hatfield caught a glint of metal.

The man started a triumphant yelp. But the yelp rose to a howl of fright as Hatfield's iron grip closed on his ankles. Around and around the Lone Wolf whirled the screeching victim, and let go. The howl thinned downward and ended in a tremendous splash.

Watery curses followed Hatfield from the black depths of the gulch as he scrambled over the bank and raced away from the still boiling *La Golondrina*. By way of a wide circle he reached the lighted street and headed for the Lucky Star at a leisurely pace, chuckling in remembrance of the shindig.

"A nice try, though, and smart," he told himself. "Start a phony fight, one jigger shootin' at another misses and plugs me plumb by accident. Everybody sorry. Uh-huh, a nice try. Well, looks like somebody has spotted me or is mistakin' me for somebody else. They sure don't waste any time goin' into action hereabouts."

CHAPTER V

Fourth of July Comes Early

AS A result of all the excitement and activity, Hatfield was hungry by the time he reached the Lucky Star. So he paused at the lunch counter for a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

"Any notion where I could tie onto a place to pound my ear?" he asked Long John Munzer, who was lounging nearby.

"I got rooms upstairs," replied the saloonkeeper. "They ain't fancy, but they're clean and the beds are comfortable."

"That'll be fine," Hatfield declared. "Could stand a little shut-eye about now. Didn't get much last night, under a tree with my saddle for a pillow. Seemed to me there was a heap of rocks under that tree. Didn't notice 'em when I laid down, but they was sure there before mornin'."

"They have a habit of doin' that," agreed Munzer. "I'll get you a key. Take the first room on the left at the head of the stairs."

As Hatfield was finishing his second cup of coffee, an alert looking young man came hurrying through the swinging doors. He glanced about, spotted Munzer and crossed the room.

"Say," he began in a rush of words, "does anybody here know anything about what happened in that blasted *La Golondrina*? I heard shootin' in that direction and hustled down there. The place was a wreck! Chairs and tables busted. Hangin' lamps knocked to pieces and glass and oil all over the floor. Back bar mirror smashed. One of the swingin' doors knocked off. A swamper moppin' blood stains in front of the bar by candle light. The dance floor gals were scared almost decent and several black eyes were shapin' up."

"Couldn't you get a line on the battle down there?" asked Munzer.

"Couldn't get a thing out of nobody except that a bunch of fellers started a row and hightailed. Some day I'm goin' to close that joint up tighter'n a cow's eye in fly time. There's always trouble there. If it wasn't for Arch Haley and some more of the boys likin' to play cards there, I'd have done it before now. You say you didn't hear anything?"

The young man was speaking to Munzer all the while, but he was looking Hatfield over.

"This is the first we've heard about it," said Munzer, glancing at Hatfield with a twinkle. "Tom, speakin' of Haley, I want you to know Jim Hatfield here, who rode in with Arch and Cale Winton. Hatfield, this is Sheriff Tom Hauser."

The sheriff stiffened slightly, but he extended his hand.

"I've a notion Hatfield is all right, in spite of the company he keeps," chuckled Munzer.

The sheriff's face relaxed in a grin. "Oh, Cale Winton ain't so bad to keep company with," he said, as he shook hands. "Even though he does snort at me like an old shorthorn with his tail full of burs, every time he meets me. Reckon he can't get over me beatin' out his man, Anse Blake."

"Cale run things so long hereabouts he don't take kind to bein' crossed up in anything," said Munzer. "He'll cool down in time. Arch Haley don't seem to hold no grudges."

"No, "agreed the sheriff, "but he plays up to Winton all the time. Reckon he has a good reason for that, though."

"Cale Winton's daughter Mary is a mighty purty gal," observed Munzer, with apparent irrelevance.

"And when old Cale passes on, she'll sort of fall in for all his holdin's, which is considerable," the sheriff added drily. "Can't say as I blame Arch."

After a few more remarks, the sheriff departed. Munzer twinkled a glance over Hatfield's range garb.

"Looks like you got your clothes a mite mussed since you was here the first time," he remarked. "Did you manage to plug anybody down there?"

"Believe the sheriff said a swamper was moppin' up blood stains," Hatfield replied ambiguously, "but he didn't mention any bodies bein' packed out."

MUNZER shook his head lugubriously. "Some varmints take a heap of killin'," the saloon man said. "We've been gettin' some prime specimens hereabouts of late. Don't have over much trouble here in town. Hauser and his deputies manage to keep right good order. But they can't be everywhere at once, and things happen."

"Out on the range, you mean?" asked Hatfield. "Or—"

"Well, there's been considerable trouble down to the mines," the saloon man told him. "A sort of shack town has mushroomed up in the canyon down there—ain't room for anything else, that's why I built here. Some off-color dives down there. The ledges are the big thing in the canyon, now, but there's still considerable placer minin' going on. Good payin' gravel in the hollows. If a feller is lucky, he can dig out a fat poke in a few days. Some fellers has been lucky that way, but not so lucky holdin' onto it. And some of 'em have had the bad luck to be found dead as well as without their pokes."

Hatfield nodded. "Not unusual."

"No, but seems almost like an organization is at work, specially down in the canyon. Besides that, the ranchers are complainin' of losin' cows. Sure wish it would stop. Such things ain't good for business."

Hatfield nodded agreement. "How far to the mines?" he asked.

"About ten miles, roughly speakin'," Munzer replied. "The Camina Trail to Camina and the railroad, forty miles to the southwest, runs through the canyon. It's the one where you have to dodge the ore wagons."

"How did they come to build the stamp mills here instead of in the canyon?" Hatfield asked. "Transportin' ore is costly."

"Not enough water down there, and no room for buildin'," Munzer explained. "Springs are all the water there is, and the canyon is narrow and, except for the gravel beds under the cliffs, there's no level ground. They had to build the mills here. Well, good night. I sleep at the far end of the hall if you happen to want somethin'. Don't forget there's a bolt on your door."

Hatfield finished another cup of coffee and mounted the stairs to his room, reflecting on Munzer's last remark, which had the sound of a warning. With his recent experience in mind, he did not mean to disregard it, although he had little fear of anybody being able to enter his room without awakening him. Carefully he bolted the door—and forgot all about the window, an inexcusable oversight, in the light of subsequent events. The window opened onto a vacant lot reserved by Munzer against the need for further building should he require more space.

Before going to bed, Hatfield carefully cleaned and oiled his guns. He laid them ready to hand and stretched out comfortably. For some time he lay drowsing and listening to the noises in the street. Gradually they subsided as the hour grew late. Finally he drifted off to sleep. . . .

His awakening was decidedly more abrupt. He found himself sitting bolt upright in bed, reaching for a gun. What had aroused him he did not know, but it had been a sudden and unwonted sound. He shot a glance at the closed door, shifted his eyes to the rectangle of the open window dimly outlined against the glow of the street lights outside. There was nothing in sight.

Then he heard another sound, from the direction of the window, a sibilant hissing.

"What in blazes?" he muttered. "Has that damn snake's brother come lookin' for me?"

He craned his neck toward the window. Then he hit the floor in a flash of movement.

Something was crawling along the floor beneath the window ledge. Not a snake, but a wavering flower of fire that spurted a shower of tiny sparks.

HATFIELD dived for it, groping in the darkness. His hand encountered something rounded and greasy to the touch. It was a tightly tied bundle of dynamite sticks, three of them. And the fire of the burning fuse was almost lapping the cap.

Straightening up, Hatfield hurled the lethal bundle out the window with all the strength of his arm. He saw the sputtering fuse describe a parabola of flickering light, and dodged back from the window.

Just before it hit the ground, the dynamite exploded with a roar and blaze of yellowish flame. Hatfield was hurled clear across the room by the concussion. He hit the wall with a crash and sagged to the floor, half-stunned. Dimly he heard the tinkle of shattered window panes.

The whole building rocked and quivered. There was an instant of paralyzed silence, then doors banged open in the corridor.

Excited voices arose in a bewildered babble.

Boots and bare feet thudded on the floor boards.

Shaking his ringing head, Hatfield got to his feet and lurched across to the window, stepping carefully to avoid the broken glass that littered the floor. He peered out and saw a slowly dissipating cloud of yellowish smoke.

The air was heavy with the tang of burned powder.

Men began appearing in the street, running up from every direction, shouting and gesticulating. Hatfield watched them crowd onto the vacant lot, peering and exclaiming. The drone of their babble became louder. There were curses, ejaculations, shaking of heads. Then gradually the crowd dispersed.

Hatfield heard steps mounting the stairs. He opened the door and peered out as John Munzer, half-dressed, hove into view.

"What happened?" Hatfield asked innocently.

"Damned if I know," growled Munzer. "Some loco coot must have figured it to be Fourth of July and got to chuckin' dynamite sticks around. Blew a hole in the ground out there you could hide a hogshead in. We didn't find anything of the feller that set it off. Maybe he ain't come down yet."

He cast a suspicious glance at the tall man.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "you don't know nothin' about it, do you?"

"Why do you ask me that?" Hatfield evaded.

"I don't know," grunted Munzer, "but ever since you showed up around here, things have been happenin'."

"Maybe they'll be quieter after I'm gone," Hatfield replied, with a significance that was lost on the saloonkeeper.

"I'm beginnin' to figure that might be," said Munzer. "Well, good night, I'm goin' to try and sleep once more. Be busy tomorrow repairin' busted windows. Lucky the buildin's still standin'."

"Yes," Hatfield agreed, again significantly, "I've a notion you are at that."

Because of something in the tone of his voice, Munzer shot him another keen glance. But the First Citizen of Tunis did not put his suspicions into words. With a grunt and a growl he stalked off down the corridor to his room. Hatfield closed his own door, chuckling.

"Don't have to lack for fresh air, anyhow," he thought, glancing at the smashed window. "Reckon the jigger will hardly come back for another try. Nice town, this."

He crawled back into bed and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER VI

The Camina Trail

NOTWITHSTANDING the hectic events of the preceding day and night, Hatfield was up early. He descended to the Lucky Star barroom for breakfast but, before sitting down to table, he sauntered around the corner of the building to view the scene of the explosion.

John Munzer had not exaggerated in his estimate of the crater hollowed out by the dynamite. Hatfield, however, gave it only a passing glance. What interested him much more was something he found beneath the shattered window of his room.

It was a long and slender pole, evidently a trimmed sapling. One end had been forked by lopping off two widespread branches.

"So that's the way he did it," mused the Lone Wolf. "Wedged the dynamite in the fork, shoved it over the window sill and jiggled it loose. It was the scraping of the pole on the ledge and the thump of the bundle dropping on the floor that roused me up. Sidewinder sure had plenty of nerve. If the sticks had come loose and dropped back to the ground, there wouldn't have been enough of him left to take up with a blotter."

He studied the slender pole thoughtfully, and shook his head. "A salty outfit, all right," he decided, "and plumb snake-blooded. The question is, who are they? And what are they after? One thing sure for certain, John Munzer is out of it, no matter what Cale Winton thinks. He'd hardly blow up his own valuable property and risk gettin' himself killed by a timber droppin' on his head. But somebody is sure out to get me."

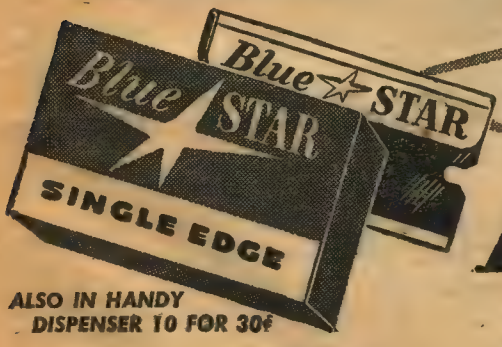
He sat down to breakfast still in a thoughtful mood. Two deliberate attempts on his life convinced him that a close-knit,

[*Turn page*]

A Dollar's Worth of Shaving Pleasure *for a Dime!*

Smoother, easier, faster shaves every time because Blue Star Blades are ground and honed in oil

Try a Blue Star Blade on hard-to-shave spots. See how much shaving pleasure it gives you for so little money. Shave and save with Blue Star today.



ALSO IN HANDY DISPENSER 10 FOR 30¢

ONLY 10¢ A PACKAGE

Blue STAR

SINGLE EDGE RAZOR BLADES

PRECISION ASR PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N. Y.

powerful and vicious organization was working in and around Tunis. No brush-popping owlhoot outfit would go to such extremes to eliminate somebody they suspected of being a peace officer, or a rival trying to horn in on their preserves.

"Playin' for big stakes, I'd say," Hatfield mused, and again he thought, "Wonder just what? Somethin' connected with the mines, probably. Chances are the cow runnin' and such are just side issues to keep 'em in spending money. Think I'll amble down and look the mines over. Might learn somethin'."

Soon after breakfast, Hatfield got the rig on Goldy and rode south on the Camina Trail. For some distance the trail crossed the mesquite and cactus flats, which were a riot of color ranging from red to delicate tints of mauve, pink and cream. Spanish dagger, sotol, century plant, catclaw, rattail cactus, barrel cactus, devil's pincushion, devil's fingers, ocotillo, and various forms of yuccas added their grotesque shapes and varied colorings to the landscape.

The ocotillos, their tall, curving, graceful wands springing from a central root were like green jets from a fairy fountain. Green and yellow mescal plants shot thirty-foot-high skyrocket stalks that exploded in starry white blooms. Yuccas, on single stems, lifted great clusters of drooping lily-white blossoms that swayed gently in the breeze like swung censers.

Beyond, groves of piñons formed a somber, dark-green backdrop for the glowing hues that spangled the flats like a shattered rainbow. And still farther beyond the gray loom of the hills shouldered the blue of the Texas sky.

"A mighty pretty country," Hatfield told Goldy. "And plenty to make everybody happy and prosperous. But there are always some folks not content with what's ready to hand but have to keep reachin' out for more, even though they hurt somebody else with the reach."

Passing through the belt of piñon groves, Hatfield found himself crossing rangeland that rolled to the lower slopes of the hills some six miles farther on. Another two miles and he sighted a small but tightly constructed ranchhouse set a little back from the trail in a grove of oaks. Barns, bunkhouse and other outbuildings were in good repair.

A mile after passing the ranchhouse, the trail wound through a tall and dense stand of chaparral. The bends were numerous, and Hatfield could seldom see ahead for more than a hundred yards.

He was approaching the bulge of one of the curves when from no great distance ahead came a thudding crash, a chorus of curses and a woman's scream of fright. Followed a bombing report and a crackle of shots.

"What in thunder?" the Lone Wolf wondered. "Hit the dust, feller! Let's see what's going on around that bend!"

* * * * *

THE Camina-Tunis stage had pulled out of Camina, the railroad town, a couple of hours after daybreak. Old Lafe Woodard, the driver, made sure that his lone passenger, a slender girl whose dark eyes were startling in contrast with her wavy gold hair and fair complexion, was comfortable.

"Here's a footstool for you, Miss Winton," he said, shoving a heavy iron box into the body of the coach. "Not a bit too good for such purty feet, either," he added gallantly, "even though there's twenty thousand dollars, gold, in it."

"Twenty thousand dollars!" exclaimed the girl, looking askance at the strongbox.

"Uh-huh," said Lafe. "Twenty thousand dollars, gold coin, headed for the Tunis bank. Saturday is pay-day for the mills and the mines over there, you know."

"Aren't you afraid of robbers?" asked the girl, still regarding the box anxiously.

"Nope," Woodard replied cheerfully. "Nobody but me and Ralph, the guard, and the bank folks know the stage's packin' it. Besides, Ralph has his shotgun and I got my old hogleg. We'd make it sort of hot for anybody that tried to stop us."

"I hope you won't need to," declared the girl fervently.

"Don't you worry none about it," said the garrulous old driver, suddenly feeling that perhaps he might have talked a bit too much. "Nothin's goin' to happen. We'll get you to Tunis all right. Reckon your dad will meet you there?"

"I'm not sure," the girl replied. "I'm getting home a few days earlier than I expected to. But I won't have any trouble getting somebody to drive me out to the ranch."

"Sure, sure," agreed the driver as he closed the door.

He climbed to the high seat, gathered up his reins.

"All set?" he asked the guard, who sat beside him, double-barreled shotgun across his knees, rifle ready to hand. "Well, here we go!"

He whooped to his four mettlesome horses and the stage roared out of Camina in a cloud of dust.

The sun was climbing to the zenith when the stage boomed through Camina Canyon and past the busy mine buildings, the shafts and the huddle of shacks that served as makeshift quarters for those of the miners who preferred not to take the ride to and from Tunis each day. Old Lafe shouted cheery greetings to acquaintances and whooped to his speeding horses.

Nearly three miles northeast of the canyon, another trail flowed up from the south to join the Camina. It was a little traveled trail that led straight to the Rio Grande and Mexico. Old-timers who knew its history called it the Raiders' Trail.

Just below where the Raiders' Trail joined the Camina, the brush was thick and high and sprinkled with large trees with overhanging branches which cast their shadows across the track. At one spot the branches interlaced so thickly that no ray of sunshine pierced their entwined foliage. The gloom beneath was cavernous.

At top speed the coach hurtled toward the junction of the two trails. It swooped into the shadow beneath the arch of the trees. The shadow was so dark that neither guard nor driver saw the rope stretched tightly across the trail from tree trunk to tree trunk.

The lead horses hit the rope. Down they went in a wild tangle of splaying hoofs, squeals and snorts. The unwieldy coach slewed around on cramped front wheels. One rear wheel struck a projecting fang of stone with a crash. The spokes splintered to matchwood, the tire rolled free, and the denuded hub thudded to the ground. The coach reeled and rocked and only a tree trunk against which it slammed saved it from a completely overturning.

Guard and driver volleyed curses and clutched the seat railing for support. The thing had happened so suddenly that neither realized what had taken place. From the body of the coach came a single frightened scream, cut off short.

OUT of the brush bulged four mounted men. Black masks covered their faces. They held leveled guns in their hands.

"Elevate!" boomed a voice.

The guard was game. He flung his shotgun to his shoulder and pulled both triggers.

The double charge ripped the mask and most of the face from one of the owlhoots. Then guard and driver toppled from the seat to lie beside the dead outlaw, their bodies riddled with bullets.

"Haul the box out and hightail!" shouted a voice from the brush. "Never mind Hank. He's done for. Move, before an ore wagon comes along!"

The three masked men moved to dismount, holstering their smoking guns.

"Look out!" the voice from the brush suddenly yelled a warning.

Around the bend raced a great golden horse, like a flicker of flame amid the shadows. And very real was the flame that gushed from the roaring muzzles of the guns held by the mount's tall rider.

Down went a second raider, to lie crumpled and motionless in the dust. Another howled with pain, reeling in the saddle and gripping his blood-spurting

shoulder. But he recovered himself and jerked his gun. His companion was already blazing away at the horseman.

Shot for shot, Jim Hatfield answered the outlaws, ducking, weaving, slewing from side to side. Goldy did a wild dance that made a most elusive target of his rider.

The wounded outlaw reeled and fell. The remaining raider rose upright in his stirrups, stood rigid for a moment, then toppled slowly sideward, to thud beside his dead companions.

With Goldy still dancing and weaving, Hatfield threw one leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. A gun boomed from the brush and a bullet turned his hat sideward on his head. He slewed his Colts around and raked the growth with his remaining bullets.

He caught a glimpse of brown flickering between the branches. There was a crashing of brush, a drumming of hoofs dimming away from the trail.

Hatfield turned to remount, then abruptly changed his mind. He recalled that terrified scream that had ceased so suddenly an instant after the crash of the wrecked coach. He stuffed fresh cartridges into his guns, his eyes never leaving the bodies sprawled in the trail. Then, satisfied that there was nothing more to fear from the owlhoots, he strode to the stage and jerked open the door.

Huddled on a seat was a girl with tumbled golden curls clustering about her white face. Her eyes were closed and she lay limp and unconscious.

Muttering under his breath, Hatfield reached in and lifted her from the seat.

"Breathin', anyhow," he muttered in relief. "Did one of those hellions plug her?"

Then, again with intense relief, he sighted a purpling bruise on her white forehead just below the hairline.

"Hit her head when the coach went over," he mumbled, as he understood. "Knocked her cold. Now I *have* got my hands full!"

For a moment he stood racking his brains, the unconscious girl still in his arms. Then he recalled the ranchhouse he had passed a little more than a mile back along the trail.

"I'll take her there," he decided quickly. "Wonder what them devils were after?"

He peered around the coach, saw the iron strong-box.

"So that's it!" he muttered. "Well, can't leave it here. Don't think the one that got away will come back for it, but anything is liable to happen in this cursed neck of the woods. Besides, he might have some pards holed up somewheres near, waiting for him."

CHAPTER VII

A Feminist

GENTLY Hatfield placed the unconscious girl on the grass at the edge of the brush. Then, working at top speed, he got the fallen horses to their feet. Neither seemed much worse for the experience, save for some bruises and skinned places.

He unharnessed one of the horses, halted it with one of the trailing reins. He lifted the heavy box from the coach and, with the other rein, deftly diamond-hitched it to the horse's back. Just as he was tightening the last knot, he heard a choking cry behind him. He whirled, hand streaking to his gun.

The girl was sitting up, a dazed look on her face, her eyes wide with terror.

"Take it easy, ma'am," Hatfield cautioned, crossing the trail to her side. "How you feel?"

She shrank back as he drew near, her face ashen.

"Wha-what are you going to do to me?" she gasped.

Although he was in no mood for mirth, Hatfield chuckled. Then he smiled down at her, his even teeth flashing white against his bronzed cheeks, his green eyes sunny.

The Winton girl stared up at him. Some

of the fear left her eyes.

"You—you're not one of the robbers?" she asked.

"Reckon not," Hatfield reassured her. "How you feelin'?"

"I feel rather dizzy," she replied, passing her hand across her bruised forehead. "And my head feels queer."

"You got a bad knock," Hatfield said. "Must have hit your head on a door handle or something. You need to be in bed and have it looked after. I'm takin' you to a place I passed on the way down here."

Before she could protest, he gently lifted her in his arms, strode to where Goldy stood waiting, and deftly mounted. He scooped up the halter of the stage horse with the strong-box on its back and secured it to his saddle-horn.

"Get going, feller," he told the sorrel.

Goldy moved forward at a good pace, the led horse trotting behind him.

The girl appeared to be recovering somewhat.

"Can't you tell me what happened?" she pleaded. "The last I remember was the stage going over."

"Reckon it was a try at a holdup," Hatfield told her. "I heard the crash and heard you scream just before the shootin' started. I'd say they were after that box back there."

"There's twenty thousand dollars in it!" she said. "The driver told me so!"

Hatfield nodded. "Figured somethin' like that."

"But those men back there," questioned the girl. "Did the guard kill them?"

"Reckon he got one with his shotgun from the looks of him," Hatfield said, shrugging.

"And the others? Oh, *you* must have killed them!"

"Reckon so," Hatfield repeated briefly.

The golden-haired girl stared up at him her dark eyes widening. What manner of man was this who could shoot down three of his fellowmen and, apparently, not be in the least affected?

But something about the sternly handsome face and the steady eyes so far above her was infinitely reassuring. She hadn't the least notion where he was taking her, but to her own astonishment, she realized that she didn't particularly care.

Her head ached and her nerves were strung to the breaking point. And the feel of his arms about her was comforting. It seemed that there was no longer anything to worry about. Everything was bound to be all right, with this tall stranger in charge.

Hatfield glanced down at her. "How come you were on the stage, ma'am?" he asked. "Where were you headin' for?"

"Tunis," the girl said. "Then on to my home, the X T Ranch, to the north of the town. I'm Mary Winton."

Hatfield's interest in her suddenly increased. "Cale Winton happen to be your father?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she answered. "Do you know him?"

"I met him yesterday," Hatfield said. "Had a talk with him— Well, here we are. Let's see if there's anybody home."

THEY had rounded a bend, and directly opposite was the small ranchhouse. Hatfield rode into the yard and shouted. A man appeared in the door, a tall man with pale eyes and an unkempt black beard. Hatfield instantly recognized Milt Sander who had been pointed out to him the night before by Cale Winton as John Munzer's friend.

"What in thunder?" exclaimed Sander in astonishment.

"Lady's been hurt," Hatfield told him briefly. "Needs attention. Thought maybe there'd—"

"Bring her in—bring her in!" Sander interrupted. He turned and shouted through the door: "Rosa! Come a-runnin'!"

As Hatfield dismounted with the girl in his arms, an ancient Indian woman appeared in the doorway beside Sander. Her face was a network of wrinkles, but her straight hair, cut in a bang across her forehead, was black without a trace of gray, and her black eyes were bright and youthful. She took in the situation at a glance and as quickly took charge.

"Come in," she said, "in here. Put her on bed. My bed. Never mind spread. It wash."

"I can sit up," Mary Winton protested. "Really, I'm not badly hurt."

"Shut up!" said Rosa. "You no know. Put down."

Checking a grin, Hatfield carried the girl into the Indian woman's room, and placed her on the snowy spread, as directed. Rosa bent over her, probing the bruise with deft fingers.

Milt Sander was staring in a dazed sort of way. Absently he raised a muscular hand to his whiskers, tugged them, and continued to stare.

Rosa finished her examination and straightened up.

"No bone bust," was her verdict. "Rosa fix. Be all right. Need rest. Hombres get out."

"Come on, feller," Sanders instantly said. "I learned better'n to argue with her, long ago."

Hatfield chuckled, smiled down at Mary Winton and accompanied Sander out the door. Mary followed his tall form with her eyes.

"Pretty girl," said Rosa. "Damn fool."

"Why, what do you mean?" Mary Winton asked in puzzled tones.

"Damn fool," repeated Rosa. "Him kind smile at woman, kiss, ride away."

"Why—why," gasped Mary, "I never said a thing!"

"No say—look—think," said the Indian woman. "Rosa know. Ought to know—married five times."

"And did they all ride away?" Mary asked irresistibly.

"Nope," Rosa replied. "Me ride away. Get tired. Want change."

Miss Winton's reaction to this rather startling remark could be dignified with no other appellation than a chuckle.

"Rosa," she said, "I'm afraid you're what they call a feminist."

"Nope," Rosa replied. "Me Yaqui."

Outside, Milt Sander turned to Hatfield. "Who is she?" he asked.

"Said her name was Mary Winton," Hatfield answered.

Sander stared, his eyes widening. "Old Cale Winton's daughter?" he exclaimed.

"So I gather," Hatfield admitted.

Sander's bearded lips pursed in a soundless whistle. Again he tugged his bristly whiskers.

"Feller," he pleaded, "won't you please tell me what this is all about?"

Hatfield told him, tersely. This time Sander whistled aloud.

"You take care of that money box," Hatfield directed. "I understand there's twenty thousand dollars in it. And send a man to Tunis to notify Sheriff Hauser."

They were in the ranchhouse yard by this time. Standing around were half a dozen men in cow country garb, keen-eyed, alert-looking young men who regarded Hatfield with grave interest.

SANDER whistled again. Then he snapped orders.

"A couple of you fellers had better ride down and look after the stage and the horses, too," he concluded.

He glanced around as Hatfield swung into saddle. "Where you goin', feller?" he asked.

"I'm going to see if I can trail that jigger who got away," Hatfield replied.

"Think you can do it?" Sander asked curiously.

"Figure it's worth tryin'," Hatfield said. "I got a sort of personal interest in that gent. He came close to drygulchin' me from the brush. I reckon he's the big he-wolf of the pack. Hung back and gave the orders. I'd like to get a look at him."

"Want me to come along?" Sander offered.

Hatfield shook his head. "You stay here and look after Miss Winton," he said. "Reckon you'll have to drive her up to her dad's place. Don't let her ride a horse till a doctor looks at that bruise on her head. An injury like that will sometimes produce a concussion that cannot be detected by anybody but a good doctor. I think she's all right, but she's too pretty a girl to take chances on. That sort don't happen along every day."

"You can say that again!" Sander de-

clared, with emphasis.

Hatfield shot him a quick glance, an amused and pleased light in his green eyes.

Accompanied by two of Sander's cowhands, Hatfield rode back to the stage. He dismounted and ripped the masks from the faces of the dead owlhoots.

"Recognize any of them?" he asked.

At first the cowboys shook their heads. Then one peered closer.

"I *have* seen this ganglin' jigger, hangin' around the bars in Tunis," he said. "That short, square one over there looks sort of familiar, too."

Hatfield nodded. The unsavory pair looked familiar to him also. He instantly recognized them as two of the group that had staged the fake gunfight in *La Golondrina* the night before.

"Well, I sort of evened up that score in a hurry," he told himself. "Now if one of the others just happens to be the dynamite chucker, I'll be plumb satisfied."

With the cowhands watching him curiously, he emptied out the dead man's pockets, revealing a rather surprising sum in gold and silver coin.

"Hellions been doin' all right by themselves," one of the punchers observed. "Feller, I believe you got a few of the bunch that's been raisin' all the hell hereabouts of late. A prime chore. Hope you get the other one."

Hatfield nodded, and deftly palmed an article he drew from the short man's pocket. It was a highly unusual object for a stage robber to be carrying. It was a small silver badge. In its surface was cut the words, "Arizona Ranger!"

Nothing further of significance was discovered. Hatfield replaced the coin and the other objects, with the exception of the badge. Unnoticed by his companions, he slipped that into his own pocket.

"Maybe the sheriff can make somethin' of that stuff," he told the punchers. "And maybe he'll know some of these horned toads. Might help him to run down the rest of the outfit."

"I'm scared Tom Hauser ain't much good at runnin' down things," volunteered one of the cowboys. "He's a nice feller and plenty salty, but I reckon he's a mite light in the upper story for such a chore. It's a bad bunch operatin' around here, feller, and with plenty of savvy. A pet fox is plumb foolish alongside that bunch."

Hatfield was inclined to agree with the puncher, on both scores, but refrained from saying so.

At that moment a ponderous ore wagon lurched around the turn from the south. The driver pulled up his mules with a yelp of astonishment.

CHAPTER VIII

Owlhoot Trap

LEAVING the cowboys to explain to the driver what had been happening, Hatfield twisted Goldy's reins over his arm and walked into the brush at the side of the trail.

As he had anticipated, he had little trouble picking up the trail of the fleeing stage robber. Nor was he surprised when it circled to enter the little used Raiders' Trail that led to Mexico.

He was somewhat surprised, however, when, a couple of miles farther on, it turned off to follow a faint track that threaded brush-grown ravines and trended steadily east through a spur of the hills. Gradually the direction changed to northeast, with a continued veering to the north.

"Hellion didn't head for mañana land, as I figured he would," Hatfield mused. "Darned if it don't look like he's follow-in' a way back to town."

The owlhoot had taken no pains to conceal his tracks and they were absurdly easy to follow. Hatfield decided that the fleeing man had doubtless felt that he could not afford to take time to be careful.

"Chances are he figured I'd be tied up with the girl and the strong-box and couldn't hightail after him right off," the

Texas Ranger concluded. "Figured right, too. All he needs to do is cover distance and maybe swing back to the Camina, where there'll be no picking out his tracks. Well, here goes for a look-see, anyhow."

As he rode, Hatfield drew the silver badge from his pocket and examined it. He discovered something he had overlooked in the swift glance before slipping the badge into his pocket.

Cut in the metal, below the words, were the numerals, "27." Hatfield quickly deduced that they represented the number assigned the Arizona law officer who had worn the badge.

"Seem to recollect they give their Rangers numbers over there," he thought. "Well, I'm scared the poor jigger who packed this badge won't be needin' it any more."

His eyes were coldly gray as he replaced the badge in his pocket. There was a brotherhood among peace officers, and the Texas Rangers held their contemporaries of the state farther west in high esteem.

As an afterthought, he fished out the badge again and stowed it in the cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt that held his own silver star of the Texas Rangers.

"This might turn out to be mighty important," he told himself. "Don't want to take any chances on losing it."

The trail, little more than a game track, continued to worm its way into deeper canyons choked with brush and littered with boulders. Hatfield soon determined, however, that it had been used more than once recently. That fact so interested him that he advanced with greater caution.

"Cussed snake track could well lead to a hole-up somewheres in this mess of gullies," he decided.

The sun was behind the western peaks and the canyons were growing shadowy. But still the tracks of the quarry showed plainly on the soft ground. And, for the present at least, it would be impossible for him to turn off anywhere because of the steep walls that hemmed the canyon in.

Hatfield slowed his pace, and redoubled his caution. The darkening gorge was sinister in its silence. As the gloom deepened, the walls seemed to draw closer together, like stealthy monsters crouching for a spring. Hatfield sensed a disquieting feeling of uneasiness; just why, he did not know.

Suddenly he sniffed sharply, and jerked Goldy to a halt. To his nostrils had come the indubitable tang of burning wood. For minutes he sat tensely in his saddle, listening and peering.

No sound dulled the sharp edge of the silence. Nothing moved amid the encroaching growth. But the woody whiff of smoke persisted.

HATFIELD resolved on a plan of action. It was certain that somebody had kindled a fire at no great distance ahead. Although it did not seem reasonable, it could possibly have been done by the man he was pursuing. And if so, it was logical to believe that others were with the fellow. Perhaps this was a hideout frequented by the band that had been terrorizing the town and countryside.

Glancing about, the Lone Wolf located a dense thicket where the deeper green hinted at water near at hand. He turned Goldy from the trail and forced him through the bushes. He was not surprised to see, close to the canyon wall, a small spring from which seeped a trickle of water.

"You can just hole up here for a spell, feller," he told the sorrel. "There's a nip or two of grass around and a drink. If I go gallivantin' along with you kickin' over rocks at every step, somebody is mighty liable to hear us comin' and perhaps cook up a hot reception for us. I'll sneak along on my bootheels till we see which way the pickle is going to squirt."

Leaving the thicket, Hatfield proceeded with caution. He doubted that his quarry was holed up somewhere ahead, but acted on the assumption that the owlhoot might be. The hills and canyons around here, he had learned were dotted with old cabins, shacks and even former Indian lodges,

occupied at one time or another by prospectors or trappers. Like as not the builder of the fire ahead was some harmless old desert rat who spent his days chipping the ledges and washing the creek beds for color.

But the Ranger preferred to take no chances. With the greatest care he eased along the faint trail, keeping to the shadows, refraining from breaking any twig or dislodging any stone. Even in the thickening gloom he could still make out the hoofprints he had been following during the afternoon.

Stronger and stronger grew the smell of wood smoke. And abruptly he saw its source.

Near the canyon wall was a dilapidated old cabin strongly built of logs, with a split-pole roof and a mud-and-stick chimney. From the chimney rose a streamer of blue smoke. Light gleamed through the dirty panes of a single window. The door was closed. Behind the cabin and slightly to one side was what appeared to be a lean-to stable. But whether horses were tethered under the sloping roof Hatfield could not make out in the deepening dusk.

Standing at the edge of a thicket, he surveyed the cabin. Aside from the drifting coil of smoke and the faint gleam of light there were no signs of accupancy. The canyon remained silent and devoid of motion.

Hatfield peered and listened, debating the advisability of crawling to the building and risking a glance through the window. Between where he stood and the old shack was open space. Should someone unexpectedly open the door he could hardly hope to avoid detection.

He resolved to wait until full dark closed down before making a move. He relaxed comfortably, wished for a smoke, but decided he could not take the chance of striking a match.

A breath too late his straining ears caught a sound of stealthy movement directly behind him. Even as his hands streaked to his belt, the hard, cold circle of a gun muzzle jammed against his back.

"Hold it!" warned a harsh voice. "Make a move and I'll blow your insides around your breast bone. Elevate—slow!"

Hatfield obeyed the command. There was nothing else to do. He was "caught settin'." Slowly he raised his hands shoulder high. He was seething with anger directed at himself. He cursed his own stupidity for blundering into a trap.

"Keep 'em there," warned the voice. A hand plucked his guns from their sheaths.

"All right, Val, I got him," called a voice.

There was a rustle in the growth and a man stepped into view, wearing an evil grin. He held a cocked six in his hand. He kept carefully to one side of Hatfield, the gun ready for instant action.

THE circle of steel prodded Hatfield's back.

"Get goin'," ordered his captor. "Head for the shack. Right through the door, and keep your hands where they are. I got a itchy trigger finger."

Again the Ranger obeyed. With the gun muzzle against his back he moved forward. The other man kept pace with him, still considerably to one side until he reached the door.

"Kick it open," said the man behind him.

Hatfield did. A significant prod sent him into the room. He glanced quickly about, noted a small iron stove with hot coals glowing through the grate bars.

In the middle of the room was a table and a couple of chairs. There were bunks built against the walls. Several rifles stood in a corner. Cooking utensils hung on pegs back of the stove. The room was lighted by a single bracket lamp with a smoky chimney. A doorway had been cut in the far wall, evidently leading into another room. No door closed the opening.

"Put your hands down, behind you, wrists together," ordered his captor. "Hold your iron on him, Val. Plug him if he makes a move. Don't see any sense in not doin' it anyhow, but orders are orders."

Working with speed and efficiency, the man behind him lashed Hatfield's wrists together with a length of hair rope that cut

viciously into his flesh.

"Right through the door over there," came the order. "Lay down on the bunk."

Hatfield moved forward. A bar of light from the bracket lamp revealed a bunk built against the far wall of the inner room, which was much smaller than the other. Without a word he lay down on it. Another moment and his ankles were securely bound.

His captor stepped back then, and Hatfield got a look at him. He instantly recognized him for another member of the group that had staged the row in *La Golondrina*. The other man, a scrawny specimen with a cadaverous face and mud-colored eyes, he did not recall having seen before.

"And that's that," said the man who had bound him. "Now we'll throw together a bite and eat. Then we'll go get the Boss."

"I don't see the sense in all this loco foolin' around," whined the man called Val in a thin, querulous voice. "Why not plug him and get it over with?"

"Shut up," rumbled the other as he busied himself over the stove. "The Boss said to hold him, didn't he? The Boss knows what he's doin'. He wants to talk to this gent, ask him a few questions. He wants to find out what he's doin' here and where he come from."

"What difference does it make?" whined Val.

"It may make considerable difference," grunted his companion. He lowered his voice to a mutter, but Hatfield's unusually keen ears caught broken sentences.

"—that business over west—maybe—them fellers stick to trail—may be more of 'em around—got to find out."

"Don't see why the Boss didn't stick around and help grab this hellion," creaked Val. " 'Stead of ridin' off to town."

The other man's voice rose in irritated tones. "And not be there meetin' somebody he'd promised to see?" he growled. "That sort of thing starts talk. Old Winton aims for folks to be around when he wants 'em. And he's always suspicious of everybody. Let him start wonderin' about somethin' and he's liable to put two and two together. Things ain't been goin' right hereabouts of late."

"But how can he know—" began Val, and was stopped short.

"You let the Boss do the thinkin'. He figgers things out, that's why he's the Boss. Just like he figured that feller tied up in there would come snoopin' along the trail he left for him to foller. You let him do the thinkin', and you just foller orders. You'd better. You talk too darn much, Val. I've seen him sort of lookin' at you of late, and you know what that means. Want him to do a chore of man-breakin' on you?"

CHAPTER IX

Fiery Ally

CRANING his neck, Hatfield could see the scrawny man's face twist as if in fright.

"I don't mean nothin'," he heard Val whine. "It's just that I figure a feller like this one ain't the sort to take chances with. When you get him hogtied, finish him, that's what I say. You don't get more'n one chance with that sort."

"One chance is all we need," the other ruffian declared grimly. "Now shut up and eat. We got a ride ahead of us."

Silence followed, save for the rattle of knives, forks and tin plates. Hatfield's anger against himself increased.

"Now I can see why that trail was so easy to foller," he muttered under his breath. "Hellion was just lurin' me on, and I fell for it like a dumb sheepherder. Well, I'm liable to pay for bein' so terrapin-brained."

Finally the two owlhoots finished their meal. The bigger man stood up, wiping his mouth.

"All right," he said, "let's go. Never mind the dishes. We'll take care of 'em when we get back. If the Boss got held up in town, we'll have to go there to tell

him, and it's better'n an hour's ride."

"He said he'd come back here as soon as he finished in town," observed Val. "Maybe we'll meet him on the way."

"Maybe," agreed the bigger man, "but we got to get goin'."

"Figure it's safe to leave that feller here by himself?" asked the scrawny fellar. "Maybe I'd better stay and keep a eye on him."

"Don't you worry about that, Val. When I tie 'em they stay tied. He'll be right here when we get back. Better for us to stick together. No tellin' what we might run into. That damn sheriff will be gallivantin' around somewheres, the chances are. He's dumb, but he's salty, and don't forget that. We can't afford to take chances. Blow the lamp out and come along."

The light was extinguished and the cabin was dark save for the faint glow of the stove grates. Hatfield heard the two men stump out, banging the door shut behind them. He heard the muffled thud of horses' hoofs dying away up the canyon.

Lying alone in the darkness, the Lone Wolf set himself to some hard and serious thinking. He was on a tough spot, and with little chance, so far as he could see, of getting off it. The mysterious "Boss," evidently the man who had directed the stage holdup, apparently desired to ask him some questions before doing him in. And doubtless he had highly unpleasant ways of getting answers from his victims.

Answers or no, Hatfield knew he would have but a short time to live after the Boss arrived at the cabin. He figured that at the most he had a little over two hours to work out a means of escape.

He tried to recall the layout of the cabin. But he could remember no projection or bit of metal against which he might chafe the cords that held his wrists. He strained at them with all his strength, but only increased the pain of the hair rope cutting into his flesh.

Sweat dewed his face and soon he was trembling in every limb. The man who had done the tying had made no idle boast when he said that when he tied 'em they stayed tied. The knots refused to loosen.

The glow of the stove grates, the only gleam of light in the black darkness, drew Hatfield's gaze. His eyes focused on the reddish glow. And suddenly there came to him a thrill of hope. Hair rope burned easily.

Which was all very well. But it would be impossible to get the cords against the fire in the stove. He could flop from the bunk and roll and hunch his way to the other room, but to rear up on his tightly bound legs and reach the grates was out of the question.

"I've got one chance," he muttered. "Might as well take it. If I slip up, it won't be a nice way to pass out, but even that will be better than what that devil is liable to hand me when he gets here."

WITH a convulsive writhe he flopped off the bunk and hit the floor with a bone-creaking jar. Then he began rolling over and over until he reached the door. Inching through the narrow opening was a tedious and exhausting struggle, but finally he made it. Then he rolled again until he was close to the rickety stove. His plan was to kick it over and scatter the glowing coals from the grate.

It was practically certain that the greasy, worm-eaten and tinder-dry floor boards would almost immediately catch fire. But he hoped to be able to get his bound wrists over a coal and char the rope enough to break it before he was roasted alive.

It was a desperate gamble, but the Lone Wolf was resolved to take it. He drew up his bound legs and kicked out with all his strength. Both boot soles caught the stove amidships with all the drive of the Ranger's sinewy legs behind them.

Over went the stove with a crash. The upper and lower halves rolled apart. Hot coals scattered over the floor boards. Instantly smolders began that quickly increased to flickering flames as the fire ate into the wood.

With desperate haste, Hatfield writhed and twisted until he got his bound wrists over one of the coals. He winced as the heat seared his flesh, but pressed the rope

hard against the coal. An odor of burned hair mingled with the whiff of wood smoke.

Enduring the agony of his scorched wrists, Hatfield continued to press down on the ember. When he felt that it was cooling, he flopped and twisted his way to another that still glowed brightly red.

He repeated the painful process, tugging and straining at the charring rope. For what seemed untold ages he struggled with the stubborn cords. The floor boards were well afire now and the air was thick with smoke. Hatfield coughed and choked and fought madly to free himself. His wrists were a searing agony—and still the ropes held!

But the increasing odor of scorched hair told him he was making progress. He pressed down hard on the coal and tugged with all his strength. A moment of despairing resistance—and suddenly the rope snapped.

Hatfield tore his wrist free from the loosened cord and levered himself to a sitting position. With numbed fingers he fumbled a knife from his pocket and slashed the ropes that bound his ankles. He struggled to his feet, and instantly pitched headlong. His legs were wooden and refused to support him.

Frantically he massaged them until the agonizing "pins-and needles" of returing circulation began. Then he struggled erect again and stood lurching and weaving. He started for the door, then realized that to open it would send in a draft that would fan the creeping flicker out of control. Choking and gasping, he stamped out the strengthening flames one by one.

The smoke thickened, but soon the last flicker had been reduced to a smolder. He staggered to the door and flung it open, gulping in great drafts of life-giving air.

He gave a little attention to the smolders and the still glowing coals, then leaned against the wall until his strength returned somewhat. He found a match and lit the bracket lamp. It's smoky radiance revealed his guns lying on the table. With an exultant exclamation, he seized them, made sure they were loaded and in perfect working order and thrust them into their sheaths.

There was a pot half full of still warm coffee on the table, which had escaped overturning in the course of his struggle with the stove. He poured a cup and swallowed, following it with another. Then he dipped grease from a pan and smeared his smarting wrists. The burns he decided, though painful, were not serious. He drank more coffee and felt decidedly better, though he was still half dazed from smoke poisoning.

Without the slightest warning the door crashed open and his two captors bulged into the room, bellowing curses, guns out. Hatfield had a fleeting glimpse of another man looming behind them in the darkness.

HATFIELD hurled himself sideward, and his arms lashed out and slammed the lamp from its bracket. Darkness swooped down, darkness split by red flashes and quivering to a thunder of reports as Ranger and owlhoots blasted death at each other through the murk.

Ducking, weaving, Hatfield shot with both hands. He felt the lethal breath of passing lead, and the hot burn of a bullet grazing his ribs. Another whispered through his hair. He reeled and nearly fell as a third knocked half the heel from his left boot.

Then abruptly he realized that no more spurts of flame were coming from the direction of the open door. Thumbs hooked over the hammers of his guns, he held his own fire and listened intently. A gurgling and gasping swelled somewhere in the dark, then ceased. Then a quick beat of hoofs outside broke the silence.

Hatfield bounded forward, tripped over a sprawled body and fell through the door. Instinctively he rolled over and to one side before attempting to rise. No shots came in his direction. He scrambled to his feet.

Far up the canyon a speeding horseman was only a flicker in the starlight. Hatfield fired twice but knew the range was too great for anything but a lucky hit. The next moment the rider vanished from his sight, still firm in the saddle.

Leaning against the side of the cabin, Hatfield ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges.

"Is that sidewinder always goin' to give me the slip?" he growled disgustedly. For he was confident that the fugitive was the mysterious Boss himself.

For a moment he stood listening for sounds of life in the cabin. Then he sidled cautiously toward the door. Holstering one gun, he fumbled a match from his pocket and struck it. The flare of the tiny flame revealed two bodies lying just inside the door.

Hatfield peered at them until the match flickered out. Neither moved. He stepped into the cabin, groped about and found the remains of the shattered lamp. The wick was still in the battered brass burner. He twisted it up and touched a match to it. The smoky flame showed that the two owlhoots who captured him were satisfactorily dead.

He surveyed the wrecked cabin, wedged the burner in a crack and by its uncertain light gave the dead men as careful a once-over as the circumstances would permit. Their pockets disclosed nothing of significance.

Hatfield retrieved the burner and carried it outside. Nearby stood two saddled and bridled horses. They bore Mexican brands that told the Ranger nothing. Saddles and bridles were ordinary gear and of no significance. Hatfield got the rigs off the animals and turned them loose to graze.

"And now I'd better see about my own cayuse," he decided. "He'll be thinkin' I got myself lost for sure. I pretty nearly did at that."

As an afterthought, he reentered the cabin and examined its contents by the last flicker of the dried-out lamp wick. The building showed signs of considerable recent occupancy, but revealed nothing else of note.

Leaving the cabin and its grisly occu-

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"...HE'S ALL AT SEA about Dry Scalp! He ought to know sun and salt water make hair dull and straggly. He needs before-swim and after-sunning care with 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
TAKE THE SAME TIP for yourself and use 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and other signs of Dry Scalp . . . work wonders in the good looks of your hair. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients . . . gives double care to scalp and hair. It's economical, too.
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®
Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.
VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

pants, Hatfield made his way down the canyon to where he had left Goldy.

"A close call," he told the sorrel as he fitted the bit into Goldy's mouth. "A couple of 'em, in fact. I've a notion, feller, I'm growin' feather-brained. I should have remembered that if those gents came back and saw a light burnin' in the cabin they'd know somethin' wasn't just right. If they'd used a mite better judgment, they could have potted me through the window, but the owlhoot brand always make slips like they did by bulging into the room. Lucky for me they do, considering the ones I've been making of late.

"Well, we got the breaks, that's all. But I don't aim to rely on gettin' any more of 'em. Can't afford to play my luck too strong. From here on, horse, we're movin' slow and easy and on the lookout for anything. It's a bad bunch we're up against. But, anyhow, we're thinning 'em out. Now, feller, let's go. I gather this track leads back to town somehow. We'll chance ridin' the trail of that sidewinder who got away."

CHAPTER X

Chuck-line-ridin' Cowhand

ONLY a few miles farther on, the canyon opened onto the rangeland, as Hatfield had surmised it would. Plotting his course by the stars, he rode north. Another half-hour and he sighted the lights of Tunis winking like fallen stars in the distance.

In a fairly equable frame of mind, he rode on to town. Aside from blistered wrists, bullet-skinned ribs and numerous bruises, he was in good physical condition and his injuries were none of them serious enough to warrant concern.

One sleeve hung in tatters, mute proof of the shooting ability of the dead outlaws. Just as his scorched overalls were reminders of his tussle with the stove and its contents.

Reaching town, Hatfield stabled his horse, washed up, and went in quest of something to eat. A spare shirt from his saddle pouch improved his appearance somewhat, but just the same John Munzer stared in astonishment when he entered the Lucky Star.

"Well, been havin' yourself a time, eh?" remarked the saloonkeeper. "What happened? Tom Hauser rode in about dark, cussin'. They still ain't got the stage fixed up and brought in. Hauser had the strongbox full of the bank's money with him. A little later Milt Sander drove by in a buckboard with Cale Winton's daughter. He stopped and asked for you, and she asked, too. Seemed plumb interested. She's a purty little thing. Takes after her mother, I been told. Sure didn't get her good looks from Cale. They stopped at Doc Cooper's office. Doc looked her over and told her she had nothin' to worry about. Then they drove on to the X T."

"Was Winton in town today?" Hatfield asked curiously.

"Yes," Munzer replied. "He was in here not long after Hauser and his deputies rode away. He was grumblin' around because Arch Haley wasn't here to meet him. Haley had promised to do a chore for him over to Camina, the railroad town. Haley showed up late. Said his horse went lame on him. Critter did look like it had had a hard time. He got another one from the livery stable and rode off after talkin' with Winton. Cale went back home."

"Winton didn't know his daughter was on the stage then?"

"Reckon not," Munzer replied. "Nobody here had any idea of it till Sheriff Hauser got back to town. I reckon that Double Circle cowboy who brought in the word of the holdup didn't know it was Cale's daughter you packed to the ranchhouse."

"No, I guess he didn't," Hatfield agreed.

"Come on over to a table and eat," invited Munzer. "Then you can tell me all about what happened."

Munzer listened in silence while Hatfield recounted the day's events.

"It's a bad bunch, all right," the saloon-

keeper said when Hatfield had finished. "And they sure are out to get you, feller."

"I aim to be there at the gettin'," the Lone Wolf replied composedly.

"Uh-huh, reckon you will be," agreed Munzer, "but keep your eyes open if you decide to hang around hereabouts. Like I said, its a bad bunch, and they'll sure be on the prod against you now. A pity that one got away. I suppose he's the brains of the outfit, all right, and so long as the brains is on the loose there'll be trouble."

Hatfield enjoyed a good meal. With the elasticity of youth he had already thrown off his fatigue. He joined Munzer in a drink and rolled and smoked a cigarette.

"Think I'll amble over to the doctor's office and let him put somethin' on these wrists," he announced, then. "It's nothin' serious, but I figure they should be looked after. I'll drop in again before I go to bed."

When Hatfield returned from the doctor's office, a tall, broad-shouldered man in nearly new and neatly fitting rangeland garb was talking with John Munzer at the end of the bar. With his light blue eyes, unruly black hair and rugged features, he was more than passably good-looking. He seemed vaguely familiar to Hatfield, who noted that his lean cheeks were a shade paler than the rest of his face.

SUDDENLY Hatfield chuckled, his green eyes as sunny as summer seas. The man was Milt Sander!

Hatfield joined the pair at the bar. Sander greeted him warmly.

"John was just tellin' me about the shindig you had," he said. "I told you I should go along with you. Might not have happened to both of us together."

"Might not have," Hatfield agreed, "but it worked out all right and I've an idea you did better by stayin' back. Get the little lady home all right?"

"I got her home all right," Sander replied. "Her dad was sure surprised to see her. Didn't expect her for another week. He didn't know me at first, with my whiskers shaved off. When he tumbled to who I was, he started to swell up like a pizened pup. But the little girl soon cooled him off. He ended up by shakin' hands with me. Maybe he didn't hanker to much, but he did shake hands."

Sander paused a moment. "You know," he added, "I've got the notion that maybe he ain't such a bad old jigger, after all, even though he did get me on the prod when he came down to my place soundin' off against John here. Say, what's so funny?"

He stared at Hatfield in puzzled surprise. For the Ranger was shaking with silent laughter.

"The Arabs," said Hatfield, with apparent irrelevance, "have a word—*kismet*."

"Uh-huh," said Sander. "It means fate, or something like that I believe."

"That's right." Hatfield nodded. "When somethin' unexplainable or plumb unexpected occurs, they call it *kismet*—fate. Funny, ain't it, how fate steps in every now and then to lend a hand at straightenin' things out? Well, so long, gents, I'm goin' to bed."

"Now what the blazes did he mean by that?" Sander demanded of Munzer as Hatfield took his leave.

But Long John, a twinkle in his faded blue eyes, refused to hazard an opinion. . . .

Thoroughly worn out by the hectic day, Jim Hatfield slept late.

He decided to take a before-breakfast walk, so sauntered to where stood the rows of neat little houses John Munzer had built for the accommodation of the mine and mill workers and their families, and for which he asked a low rental.

Munzer had contrived an irrigation system from the springs to the north, and each house had its own garden plot and flower garden.

Eyes followed the Ranger's tall form as he strolled along, and soon, as he sat on a boulder near the outskirts of town, a crowd of children surrounded him. Little boys gravely examined his big guns—from which the cartridges had been carefully removed—and little girls asked sober questions about cowboys and Indians. For most of the families occupying the houses

were from the eastern mining communities, come in answer to a call sent out by Munzer for skilled deep-shaft men.

Mothers came to doorways and smiled at the group, and men off duty pointed Hatfield out as the man who had broken up the Camina-Tunis stage robbery and rescued Cale Winton's daughter.

Hatfield spent some time with the children, and it was near noon when he finally repaired to the Lucky Star for some breakfast. While he was eating, the swinging doors banged open and Cale Winton stamped in, looking to be in a decidedly bad humor. He spotted Hatfield, lumbered over to his table, and sat down.

"Looks like I keep gettin' deeper in debt to you all the time, son," he said. "I don't know what might have happened to my little girl if you hadn't come along like you did, when you did."

"The chances are nothin' would have happened," Hatfield replied. "The holdups were after the strong-box, and I figure they wouldn't have paid much attention to anything else."

"Maybe not," Winton conceded, "but just the same I'm mighty glad you happened along. And that blasted Milt Sander jigger! Mary said he looked after her like she belonged to him. I'm wonderin'—maybe I sort of misjudged Sander."

HATFIELD nodded gravely.

"I think maybe you did," he said.

"Maybe," Winton admitted. "Anyhow, I'm plumb tired of the way things have been goin' hereabouts of late. A couple of weeks back I wrote to Bill McDowell, the Ranger Captain, in Austin, tellin' him how things were gettin' plumb out of hand and askin' to send a troop over to keep order. Never even got even an answer to my letter. Yesterday I sent Arch Haley over to Camina with a wire to the Governor. I figure to get results this time. I pack a mite of influence over to the capital."

"You sent Haley to Camina with the wire?" Hatfield repeated.

"That's right," said Winton. "I sure told the Governor. He'll put a flea in McDowell's ear. It's a hell of a note. A chuck-line-ridin' cowhand ambles in and does more to clean things up in two days than the duly elected peace officers are able to do in six months! A hell of a note!"

"Things just sort of came my way," Hatfield said, and smiled.

"Uh-huh, the sort of things nobody else has been able to handle," Winton said drily. "This used to be a fine range, Hatfield, but since those infernal mines opened up, it's been gettin' worse and worse. And what good are they, anyhow? Just makin' a lot of money for some folks who won't know what to do with it when they get it. No good is comin' from 'em all, I tell you! No lastin' good, that's certain. Pike Causey sure didn't do this country any favor when he scratched around in them gravel beds!"

CHAPTER XI

The Road to Damascus

SMILING, a little sadly, Hatfield gazed at the irate old cowman who was so hotly berating the mines and mining men. Anyone watching would have thought, from that smile, that Hatfield was the older and wiser of the two. It was the smile in which a father privately indulges when his little boy kicks his favorite toy because the mechanism is broken. The smile of one who, unforgetful of the scheme of the firmament and the spinning planets, will not be moved to anger by him who sees only the four sides of a pit.

Perhaps, out of some corner of his mental vision, Cale Winton perceived this, vaguely. For his face flushed slightly and his gaze shifted away from Hatfield's steady eyes.

"If any good's ever come out of it," he growled defensively, "I'd sure like to have somebody show it to me."

There was a dancing light in Hatfield's eyes as he finished his cup of coffee.

"Got a little time to spare, suh?" he asked. "If you have, how'd you like to

take a little walk with me?"

"I'm agreeable," grunted Winton, glancing a trifle askance at the Ranger, as though a little suspicious of some trap. "I got some time to spare. Figure to stick around town till Arch Haley gets back from Camina. Want to know what answer he brought from the capital."

"Haley is from over Arizona way, isn't he?" Hatfield asked, as if by way of making conversation, as they left the saloon.

"Uh-huh," said Winton. "Lived most of his life over there. Him and his dad, Porter Haley, both worked for a spread outside of Tombstone in Cochise county, the Tree L. Porter Haley never amounted to much. Always just a hired hand. Too fond of gamblin'. That was his trouble. He ended up by gettin' himself killed in a fool card game. Sort of accident, I gather from what Arch has told me. Arch is more like his uncle, Courtney Hale. Smart, and a good business man, like Courtney was before he took so sick durin' the last years of his life."

Hatfield nodded, and turned into D Street. At a leisurely pace, he led the way to the mining settlement to the east end of D Street.

"Nice, aren't they?" he said, gesturing toward the neat houses he had seen that morning. "Don't show up much, set against your big place, I reckon, but not bad."

Old Cale grunted, and tugged at his mustache. They moved on a little farther. Seated in front of a garden patch was a little girl playing with a doll. A rather thin little girl with blue eyes and golden curls. She looked up with a smile as Hatfield paused beside her.

"Hello, Uncle Jim," she said.

"Remembered what I told you to call me, eh?" Hatfield asked, and smiled back.

"Why, yes," she said. "All the kids call you Uncle Jim." Then she remarked inconsequentially, "My hands are dirty. I've been planting some more flowers in my garden. Would you like to see them?"

"Reckon I would," Hatfield replied energetically.

With her tiny hand in his big palm, the child led him to the little patch that was bright with blooms.

"They grow nice here," she said. "They wouldn't grow when I used to plant 'em, where we came from."

"How's that?" Hatfield asked.

"Oh, the smoke and the coal dust killed 'em," she explained. "I guess they couldn't breathe, just like my mommy couldn't breathe when she worked in the breaker. She didn't grow much there, either. Here's my mommy now."

HATFIELD and Winton turned. A rather pretty young woman had come up behind them. She was thin, with the same thinness noted in the child. Her cheeks were slightly hollow and on the cheek-bones was still the tinge of a hectic flush. Hatfield bared his black head to her, and Cale Winton also hauled his rain-shed off his tawny mane.

"I heard what Betty said," the young woman remarked, smiling a trifle wanly. "Reckon she was right about it. The flowers wouldn't grow. Too much dirt and sulphur fumes from the coke ovens. I wasn't 'growing' much, either, as she said. I was getting thinner all the time, and I had a cough. Lots of the women who work in the breakers sorting the coal for size come down with the same trouble I had. And Mike, my husband, he wasn't well, either. Not enough fresh air and sunshine, I reckon—twelve hours a day in the coal mine.

"One night Mike was reading the paper. All of a sudden he laid it down and said to me, 'Jane, we're going away from here. I just been reading a notice from the employment agency. It says they want experienced shaft workers for some new gold mines out in Texas. They offer to advance the train fare. Maybe we'll starve out there, too, but maybe we'll starve more comfortably.' "

Jim Hatfield nodded, understanding. "So you came," he said.

"Yes, we pulled up and came here. Mr. Munzer rented us this little house and said he'd wait for the rent till we got on our feet. Mike has been doing fine in the

mine. He knows all about power drills and shoring and drifts. Last month they made him a foreman. I'm beginning to feel real pert again, and Betty has been gaining weight, too. The air here is wonderful, and so is the sunshine. It's a beautiful country. Those mines have certainly been a blessing to us, and to lots of other folks who came out."

Hatfield glanced at Winton, a shadowy smile quirking his lips. Old Cale wore a strained look, and his eyes shifted away from the Ranger's.

After a few more words the two men walked on in silence.

"That little girl," Hatfield suddenly remarked. "Pretty, wasn't she?"

"Uh-huh," Winton agreed.

"And," Hatfield proceeded, "I've a notion, your girl was just about like that, once. With golden curls and big eyes."

"Uh-huh, reckon she was," Winton agreed again, "only her eyes were black, like her mother's, 'stead of blue."

"And I reckon, too," Hatfield added, "that she had nice fat little legs and rosy cheeks, from plenty of fresh air and Texas sunshine and good food."

Winton said likely that was so. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks and faced the Lone Wolf.

"You don't need to go rubbin' it in," he growled. "You've already made me feel lower'n a snake's belly."

Hatfield's smile broadened. "There was a man who walked the road to Damascus," he observed.

"Yeah," said Winton, "a feller named Saul. He was considerable of a maverick in them days, but later on he got to be the Apostle Paul. *He* saw a light on the road to Damascus. I read my Bible, Hatfield."

"If you do, maybe you will recall who spoke to him out of the light," Hatfield said.

"Yes, I remember that, too," said Winton. He glanced strangely at his tall companion. "He said He'd come again," he muttered, almost to himself. "But I reckon most of us would be so busy with ourselves and our own darned affairs we wouldn't know Him if we met Him in the middle of the road."

"It really wouldn't matter," Hatfield replied, "so long as we are not weighed in the balance and found wanting.'"

THEY walked on, and again there was silence. Cale Winton abruptly turned on his heel.

"I'm goin' back to the Lucky Star," he announced gruffly. "I want to have a talk with John Munzer."

"And I think I'll take a little ride," Hatfield said in cheerful tones. "I still haven't had a chance to look over the mines. Was sort of held up last trip down that way."

Parting with Winton, he repaired to the livery stable and got the rig on Goldy. At a good pace he rode south on the Camina Trail.

But when he reached the mine site in the canyon, he did not pause. Instead, he rode on past the gaunt buildings and the scattered shacktown. Once out of the canyon, he quickened the sorrel's pace and continued on, with the mountains marching parallel to his course, their crests aflame with the later afternoon sunlight, their mighty chests and shoulders already swathed in mantles of royal blue.

On under the glowing stars he rode, when night fell, with Goldy's irons drumming a steady roll on the hard surface of the trail. Only once did he draw rein to allow the sorrel to drink from a small stream.

It lacked two hours of midnight when he sighted the lights of Camina, the railroad town. He stabled his horse and proceeded at once to the telegraph office.

"I'd like to look over the copies of all messages sent from this office during the past two days," he told the operator.

The operator frowned and shook his head. "You ought to know our files are strictly confidential, cowboy," he said. "We can't show 'em to anybody."

For answer, Hatfield laid the silver star of the Rangers on the table.

The operator stared. He changed his tone to one of respect.

"Reckon that's different, sir," he said.

"I'll get 'em for you."

For some time Hatfield pored over the copies.

"And you are sure this is all?" he said at length.

"Plumb sure, sir," the operator declared.

"Nothin' sent to the capital?"

"No, sir. What you have there is all."

Hatfield riffled the sheets together, his eyes dark with thought, the concentration furrow deepening between his black brows.

"Take a message," he said briefly. "To Captain William McDowell, Ranger Post Headquarters, in Austin."

The operator wrote it down, carefully repeated the wording to Hatfield and opened his key. Hatfield waited in the office until receipt of the message was acknowledged.

"You should have an answer some time tomorrow," he told the operator. "Hold it for me. And," he added, his level gaze hard on the man's face, "I reckon you remember that your files *are* strictly confidential."

"I ain't liable to forget, under the circumstances," the operator replied, with a grin. "The rules of the company forbid me doin' any talkin' of any kind."

"A good rule," Hatfield smiled. "Where's a good place to eat and sleep?"

The operator made a suggestion, and Hatfield obtained a room without difficulty and enjoyed a good night's sleep. Late afternoon of the following day found him back at the telegraph office, where the operator of the night before had just come on duty.

"Here's your answer, sir," said the operator. "Didn't take long to get it through."

"Captain Bill works fast," Hatfield commented. He took the message and unfolded it. It read:

BADGE NO. 27 WAS ASSIGNED TO ARIZONA RANGER BURNS WESTON. WESTON WAS KILLED BY WIDELOOPERS A LITTLE MORE THAN A YEAR BACK. KILLERS ESCAPED. TRAILED TO EASTERN NEW MEXICO AND THERE LOST TRACK OF. ABOUT THE HALEYS. THEY WERE WELL KNOWN AROUND TOMBSTONE. COWHANDS AND GAMBLERS. PORTER HALEY KILLED IN POKER GAME

[*Turn page*]

Jim Shoulders: World Champion All-Around Cowboy, 1949, wears and endorses Wranglers.
THE TOP COWBOYS WEAR
BLUE BELL
Wrangler
Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.
WESTERN JEANS

Many other Rodeo Cowboys Association champions wear Wranglers, including:

Todd Whatley, All-Around World Champion, 1947
Gerald Roberts, All-Around World Champ., 1948
Casey Tibbs, World Saddle Bronc Rid. Champ., '49
Bill Linderman, Runner-up World Champion, 1949

BLUE BELL WRANGLERS are tough and rugged. Made of heaviest 11-oz. Sanforized denim. Won't shrink out of fit. Styled by Rodeo Ben, custom tailor to top cowboys and ranchers. Men's and boys' sizes — **zipper or button front.** Women's Wranglers, 8 oz. wt., for trim figures, sizes 12 through 20. *Each* garment in Blue Bell's complete line of work and play clothes is guaranteed the best made, best fitting you can buy— *or your money back!*

BLUE BELL, Inc., Greensboro, N. C.
WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

FIGHT NEARLY TWO YEARS AGO. TALK OF COLD DECKING. KILLER NEVER APPREHENDED. NO LEGAL ACTION. ARCH HALEY DROPPED OUT OF SIGHT SOON AFTER FATHER'S DEATH. SAID TO HAVE GONE BACK TO TEXAS, WHERE HE WAS BORN.

CHAPTER XII

Outsmarted Again

WITH the message in his hand, Hatfield stood gazing out the telegraph office window, his brows drawing together.

"Not much to go on," he was thinking, with little satisfaction. "Nothing, in fact, except that Arch Haley never sent the message Winton entrusted to him to wire to the capital. Evidently Arch don't want Rangers sent here. Why? That's the big question, and I haven't got the answer—yet. Looks like I need to get a break, and it's up to Haley to give it to me. That is, if he's the man I want. And I sure haven't any proof he is. Just because a feller came from Arizona doesn't necessarily mean he killed somebody over there. But just the same, nearly a year went by between the time Haley dropped out of sight and when he showed up here. Which may mean a lot, or nothing at all. Well, here goes for some more ridin'."

Thanking the operator, he left the office and mounted his horse.

He was back in Tunis before midnight. In the Lucky Star he got a rather surprising bit of news.

"We're goin' to have a school, and a church!" John Munzer announced after he greeted the Ranger.

"Fine," Hatfield applauded. "Both fine for any community."

"You could have knocked me over with a feather," Munzer continued. "Cale Winton is goin' to build 'em!"

"That so?" Hatfield remarked, his eyes dancing.

"It sure is so," repeated Munzer. "Yesterday afternoon he came rollin' in lookin' like he aimed to bite somebody. Came right over to where I was standin' and started talkin'. Said he'd been thinkin' things over and believed the kids hereabouts ought to have a chance for better education. Said Sunday School would be good for 'em, too. Said he'd put up the money if I'd look after the buildin' end. Then we sat down and had a drink together, and he shook hands with me when he left with Arch Haley."

"Haley was here?" Hatfield asked, interested.

"Uh-huh," said Munzer. "Come in when Winton and me were talkin'. Winton asked him if he'd took care of some chore, whatever it was. Haley said he had. Said everything would be taken care of. I don't know what they were talkin' about, but Winton said somethin' that sounded funny and seemed to sort of surprise Haley."

"What was that?" Hatfield asked.

"What he said so far as I recollect, was just about like this," Munzer repeated slowly. "Said, 'I'm beginnin' to think maybe we won't need 'em. Somebody here already who'll take care of things.' Haley like to of jumped out of his chair. As they went out the door, I heard him ask Winton what he meant. But I didn't hear what Winton answered. But the church and the school! What in blazes happened to that old shorthorn, anyhow?"

"Perhaps he journeyed on the 'road to Damascus' and saw—something," Hatfield chuckled.

"Damascus?" repeated the puzzled Munzer. "That's a darn little old cowtown over in the middle of Arkansas. Ain't nothin' to see there. Don't believe Winton's ever been there, anyhow. . . ."

AN UNEVENTFUL week followed. Jim Hatfield grew heartily tired of the tedious inactivity.

"I've a notion I'll soon be taking you up on that riding chore," he told Cale Winton one day as they stood watching ground being broken for the new school and church. "Figure I'll wait till after Saturday, though. Saturday is pay-day for the mills and the mines. Should be sort of lively hereabouts."

"Pay-day for the spreads, too," Winton grunted. "There'll be plenty of merry hell here Saturday. Sure wish you'd decide to come along with me right off. I get lonesome for somebody to talk with at the house. Don't see much of Arch Haley of late, and less of Mary. That Milt Sander is always under foot."

"Sander and Miss Mary sort of get along, then?" Hatfield asked in amused tones.

"They sure do," growled Winton. "I don't know whether to like it or not. I'd sort of had notions about Arch Haley for Mary, and last summer when she was home from school, she seemed to like him. But there's no use for me to meddle. She always manages to get her way, somehow or other. And I reckon Sander ain't a bad feller. Steady goin', all right, and works hard. Maybe she might do worse. They were figurin' to go ridin' together this afternoon, I believe. Mary said they might work down this way and stop in town. Come on, let's go over to the Lucky Star and get a drink and pow-wow with Munzer for a spell."

As they headed for the saloon, Winton again brought up the subject of Arch Haley.

"I sort of cotton to that young fellow," he said. "He's up-and-comin' and is ambitious. Just yesterday he borrowed a hefty passel of *dinero* from the bank here in town, with his spread for security, of course. Says he aims to buy improved stock over in the Nueces country and run 'em in. He says the day's comin' when that's the only kind of beef there'll be a market for.

"Don't know but what he's right. The buyers are gettin' mighty particular and sort of look sideways at the longhorns. I'm beginnin' to think along them lines myself. Haley told me what he had in mind and I approved of it. I helped him get the loan through—I'm a director of the bank. I figure he's got a notion there, all right."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

When they arrived at the Lucky Star, John Munzer had a surprising bit of news.

"Funniest holdup over to Camina I ever heard tell of," said Munzer. "Feller just rode up from there and told me about it. Couple of masked gents held up the telegraph office! Roped the operator and just about tore the place to pieces huntin' for somethin'. Who in blazes ever heard of anything worth stealin' in a telegraph office?"

Cale Winton swore disgustedly. "We'll have to put a padlock on the church, when we get it built," he declared. "Or some sidewinder will sneak in and steal the Bible."

Jim Hatfield said nothing, but his eyes seemed subtly to change color as he listened. Shortly afterward, he left the saloon, leaving Winton and Munzer talking together.

"Outsmarted again," he told himself disgustedly. "That bunch seems to be always one jump ahead of me. Somebody either tailed me to Camina or they had somebody posted there to keep an eye on things. Anyhow, they learned I sent a message and figured they'd better find out what was in it. Reckon they did, all right. Those two jiggers were after the copies of the telegrams. Now they know who I am and that I'm on their trail. And the chances are they'll cover up proper. Seems like I'm *never* to get a break. . . ."

OUT on the range, Milt Sander whistled gaily as he rode up the winding gravel road that led to the big X T ranchhouse. Mary Winton was waiting for him on the broad veranda, trim and charming in overalls, soft blue shirt and little high-heeled riding boots.

"All set to go?" he called to her.

"All set!" she called back. "Pete is bringing my horse around.

A wrangler appeared leading a sleek bay which he reined in beside Sander's tall roan. Sander glanced in surprise at the light rifle snugged in the saddle-boot.

"Figure to do some huntin'?" he asked jocularly.

"I like to shoot, and I know how," Mary replied as she sprang lightly to the saddle. "Dad gave me that gun for a birthday

present. Sent to New York for it. It's a thirty-thirty."

"Small caliber, but probably it packs a hefty wallop," Sander commented.

"It does," Mary replied. "It carries farther than a forty-four Winchester, and the bullets are expanding. Anything they hit goes down and stays down. And it's point-blank up to three hundred yards."

"Hope you don't ever take a notion to use it on me," Sander chuckled.

"I will, if I ever catch you making eyes at another woman," Mary promised. "Let's go. I told Dad last night we'd circle around by the hills and meet him in town."

They rode off together, across the springtime rangeland that was myriad shades of green. The chaparral thickets were starred with blossoms and the hills were emerald gems in a setting of golden sunshine. Birds were singing in the branches and little animals were busy with their mysterious affairs. All nature was pulsing with strengthening life.

For some time the pair rode without speech, charmed to silence by the flood of beauty around them. But youth is usually vocal and soon their laughter rang as they chatted lightly on various subjects.

They rode in a wide circle that gradually drew nearer the long slopes that ran up to a range of hills that cut the rangeland on the east. By early afternoon they were following a faint trail that paralleled the slopes less than a hundred yards to the left.

"About five miles more to town," Sander remarked. "A helpin' of chuck wouldn't go bad about now. This air makes me hungry."

"I'm starved," the golden-haired girl confessed. "I've heard people say you can live on love, so I guess we're not in love."

"Maybe you're not," returned Sander, "but I sure am."

"But just the same you're hungry," Mary pointed out.

They laughed together. Sander suddenly leaned in the saddle to take note of a field mouse perched on a nearby grass clump. His intended remark ended in a choking gasp and he plunged headlong to the ground, to lie motionless. From the nearby slope came a booming report.

Mary Winton cried out in horror, her voice rising in a piercing scream of agony.

But Mary was the daughter of fighting pioneer stock. Her great-grandmother had given a hot reception to Apaches who raided her lonely cabin when the men folks were away. The Apaches had departed faster than they came.

Before the echoes of the gunshot had ceased to slam back and forth between the tree trunks, Mary was out of the saddle, the .30-30 gripped in her slender hands. She had seen the thread of smoke wisping up from the growth about a hundred yards up the slope and twice that distance from where she stood with the rifle barrel across her saddle.

Her black eyes blazing with a fire that would have equalled old Cale's at his best, she raked the brush back and forth with a crackling volley.

At the fourth shot the growth beneath the smoke spiral was violently agitated. Something came tumbling from a clump of brush to bound and roll down the slope till it came to rest against a boulder.

Eyes still blazing, Mary held her fire, finger on the trigger. There was no further movement on the slope. She thrust the rifle into the boot and ran to where Milt Sander lay, his bloody face buried in the grass. Exerting all her strength, she managed to turn him over on his back.

Above his left temple blood was trickling from a deep and ragged furrow.

"Creased!" Mary panted with infinite relief. "Just creased, and he's still breathing! But it looks bad."

CHAPTER XIII

Bringing Matters to a Head

DROPPING to the ground, Mary cradled the bloody head in her firm young arms and held it close, frantically

trying to decide what to do. Should she leave him and go for help? But she had a terrible fear that perhaps the drygulcher might have a companion somewhere near, or might himself be only wounded. She shrank from leaving the unconscious Sander defenseless.

Sander himself solved the problem by groaning, thrashing about and opening his eyes to stare up at her dazedly.

"Are you all right, darling?" Mary asked. "You're not dead?"

A wan grin quirked Sander's lips. "Reckon I am," he mumbled. "Anyhow, I'm in heaven and seein' an angel."

He struggled to a sitting position as he spoke, and his arms went around her slender body. But even as she returned his embrace, she felt him reel and tremble. Gently but firmly she disengaged his arms.

"See if you can stand," she told him. "I'll help you."

With her aid, Sander managed to get to his feet, to stand weaving.

"Seem sort of dizzy," he mumbled.

"You're hurt worse than you think," Mary said. "Try and get on your horse. We've got to get you to a doctor as quickly as we can."

After several vain attempts, the wounded man suceeeded in forking the roan. He sagged in the saddle, gripping the horn for support.

"Think I can hang on this way," he told her haltingly.

"All right," Mary said. "I'll lead him."

She mounted her own horse and, holding the roan's bridle, headed for town as swiftly as she dared, and with many an anxious glance back at the swaying rider.

As they proceeded, Sander got up a little strength. His seat became firmer and Mary risked increasing their speed. After what seemed to her an endless eternity, they sighted Tunis.

Another ten minutes and they were in the outskirts of the town.

Men came running to their assistance and helped Sander dismount at the doctor's office.

"Find my father!" Mary begged. "He's somewhere in town."

Cale Winton was in the Lucky Star, talking with Hatfield and John Munzer when a man dashed in with the news of the drygulching. All three hurried to the doctor's office.

"I don't think there's anything to worry about," the doctor told them. "But I'd better keep him here in bed for a day or two till I'm sure. He got a hard wallop."

He was working over the wounded man as he talked. Within minutes Sander was sitting up in bed, his head swathed with bandages, and asking for a cigarette.

Hatfield drew Mary Winton aside.

"Ma'am," he said, "do you think you could lead me to where it happened?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can," Mary told him.

"All right, if you feel up to it," Hatfield said.

"I'm all right," she assured him, "now that I know Milt isn't in any danger. It's only about five miles. Get your horse while I tell Milt I will be gone for a while. I'll meet you outside."

At top speed, Hatfield got the rig on Goldy. Shortly he and Mary Winton rode away together, leaving old Cale shaking his head outside the doctor's office.

"Mr. Hatfield, who in the world could have done such a thing to Milt, and why?" Mary burst out as soon as they had cleared the town.

"Reckon most every man has some enemies," Hatfield replied ambiguously.

"Whoever it was meant to kill him," she declared. "If he hadn't bent over to look at a field mouse at just that instant, they would have done it!"

"Yes, drilled him dead center, the chances are," Hatfield agreed. "Ma'am, who all knew you were goin' ridin' today?"

"Why, everybody around the ranchhouse, I suppose," she said wonderingly. "Everybody there saw us ride off."

"And who knew you intended to circle around past the slopes and to town?" Hatfield added.

MARY wrinkled her brow.

"Hal Whetsall, the range boss, was in the room last night when I told

Dad," she said thoughtfully. "And Arch Haley. I don't think there was anybody else present."

Hatfield nodded. He appeared not to notice the questioning glance she shot at him.

"You say we've got about five miles to go?" he deftly changed the subject to ask.

"Yes," Mary answered. "I'm sure I can locate the spot. I noticed it was right in line with a bald knob rising up from the slopes."

Twenty minutes later she touched Hatfield's arm.

"There it is," she said. "There's the knob. Half a mile more and we should be right in line with where I saw the smoke rise from the brush."

A few minutes more of riding and Mary pointed up the slope.

"See that big rock up there?" she asked. "That's the rock the man I shot at rolled down behind."

Hatfield reined in and swung down from saddle. "I'm going to sneak up there for a look-see," he said. "You stay here. That sort is dangerous as a back-busted rattler, if he ain't done in complete."

But Mary was on the ground beside him. "I won't!" she flared. "If you can take a chance, so can I."

Hatfield smiled down at her. "I haven't got time to argue the point with you," he said. "But stay behind me."

When they reached the boulder, Hatfield slid quickly around it. His hand dropped away from his gun-butt. Broken and flattened brush showed where the drygulcher had rolled down the slope, but there was no sign of a body, living or dead. Nor did a search of the vicinity discover one.

Peering about, Hatfield spotted something white under a thick bush. He stooped down and drew out a nearly new hat.

"Must have dropped off his head as he rolled down," he remarked, turning the hat over in his bronzed fingers. "This is a pretty nice rainshed. The kind that costs plenty. Might as well take it along with us."

He carefully folded the hat, preparatory to stowing it in his saddle pouch, his eyes probing the ground the while.

"Three horses came down here, and three went back up," he told the girl. "The jigger wasn't by himself."

"There was only one shot fired," Mary said.

"Naturally," Hatfield replied. "They wouldn't take a chance on pluggin' you. Chances are the other two stayed up on top of the ridge. Sent the best shot down here to do the chore. When he didn't show up after the shootin', they slipped down to see why, bringing his horse along. Packed his body back with them on the lead horse, I'd say. That is if he wasn't able to fork it himself, and from what you told me about the way he rolled, I'd say he wasn't. I'll get our horses and we'll see if we can follow their trail."

The trail was easy to follow up the slope. It continued for about two miles along the crest of the ridge, then diagonaled down to the rangeland. The sun had set and shadows were already curdling in the hollows.

Hatfield shook his head.

"Almost impossible to follow a trail over grassland even in broad daylight," he said. "No chance at all, now. I see it heads west by a little north."

"The trail is over that way," Mary said. "It runs clear to Pecos and is well-traveled."

Hatfield nodded. "Which means we've done all we can," he said. "Might as well head back to town. Or would you rather go to your ranchhouse?"

"I'm going back to town," Mary decided. "I'll stay there tonight. Dad will be waiting for me. I told him we would be back."

ON ARRIVING in Tunis, they found Milt Sander resting comfortably. Cale Winton procured a room for his daughter and rejoined Hatfield.

"What in blazes is it all about?" he asked the Ranger. "Have you any idea?"

"I'd say," Hatfield replied, "that somebody is mighty anxious to get Milt Sander out of the way."

"But who, and why?" demanded the bewildered cattle baron.

"That remains to be found out," Hatfield said noncommittally, although there was little doubt in his mind as to who was responsible for the outrage and why.

Winton swore in weary disgust, and they headed for the Lucky Star and something to eat. . . .

The next morning Hatfield visited the big general store that carried men's furnishings. He placed on the counter the hat he had picked up in the bushes on the slope.

"Been sellin' any of this sort lately?" he asked the bearded proprietor.

The storekeeper stroked his whiskers and regarded the rainshed with shrewd old eyes.

"Don't sell many of that sort," he replied. "Cost too high. But I did sell this one, or one just like it, last week to one of the Rocking H cowhands, a feller named Cooley. Where'd you get it?"

"Picked it up," Hatfield said. "You sure about sellin' one to the Cooley feller?"

"Uh-huh, I'm sure," the storekeeper replied. "Him and some more of Arch Haley's riders were in here stockin' up on some stuff. I recollect Cooley pickin' out one of these expensive J. B's. Remember it was a mighty small size—the only one of that size I had in stock. Let's see a minute."

He fumbled inside the sweatband, nodded.

"Darned if I don't believe it's the same hat," he declared. "You don't sell many forty-dollar rainsheds of this size. Nobody does."

Hatfield also nodded. "Reckon it belongs to that feller, all right." He added with a meaning that passed over the storekeeper's head, "I'll try to get in touch with him, if he's still around."

Leaving the store, Hatfield went to the sheriff's office. He found Sheriff Hauser in. He laid the hat on his desk.

"Picked this up in the bushes where the drygulcher who made the try for Milt Sander yesterday was holed up," he said. "Looks mighty like it was worn by the gent who did the shootin'. Storekeeper is just about sure he sold it last week to a feller named Cooley, who rides for Arch Haley's Rockin' H. Thought maybe you might be interested."

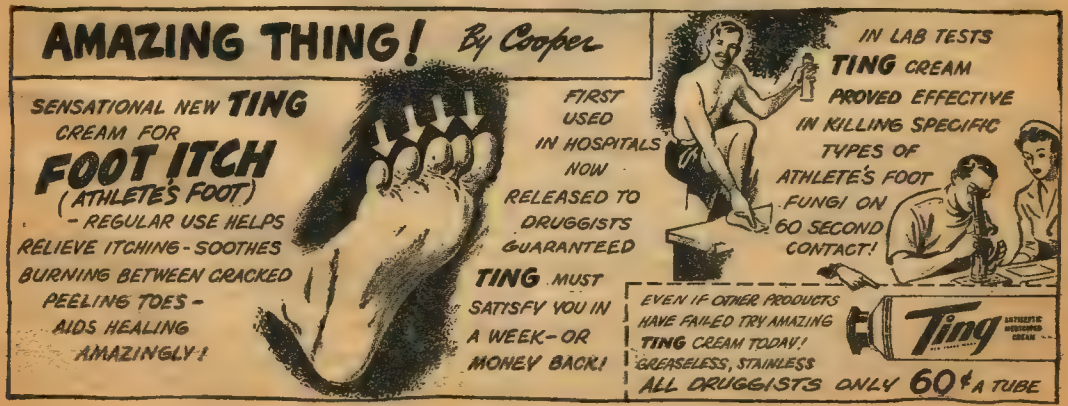
Sheriff Hauser stared at the hat, and then at the Ranger.

"You're darn right I'm interested!" he exclaimed. "Cooley, eh? I recollect that jigger. A hard-lookin' character if I ever saw one. I'd wondered how Arch Haley came to hire him."

"What do you aim to do now?" Hatfield asked the lawman.

"I'm ridin' up to the Rockin' H pronto. I hanker to have a talk with Senor Cooley. If he's short a hat, he's sure goin' to have some explainin' to do. Much obliged for bringin' this in, feller. I'd sure like to drop my loop on the horned toad who did that shootin'. The snake-blooded varmint might just as easily have plugged Winton's daughter."

[Turn page]


AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!
FIRST USED IN HOSPITALS NOW RELEASED TO DRUGGISTS GUARANTEED
TING MUST SATISFY YOU IN A WEEK - OR MONEY BACK!
IN LAB TESTS TING CREAM PROVED EFFECTIVE IN KILLING SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT FUNGI ON 60 SECOND CONTACT!
EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING TING CREAM TODAY! GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE
Ting

A little later, Hatfield watched the sheriff and his two deputies ride north. The sheriff looked grim.

"Don't think he'll get to talk with Cooley," Hatfield told himself. "But he may give that bunch a jolt that will cause them to do somethin' to tip their hand."

CHAPTER XIV

Ranger's Hunch

IT WAS Hatfield who got the jolt when the sheriff returned to town a few hours later.

"No, I didn't find him," Hauser said angrily in answer to the Ranger's question. "Didn't find anybody. Not a soul up there. Place looked plumb deserted. Figure they've all headed for town to get ready for the pay-day bust tomorrow. Can't understand why we didn't meet 'em on the way. You seen anything of 'em?"

"No," Hatfield said quietly. "I haven't seen 'em."

"Well, I figure to see 'em as soon as they get here," the sheriff snorted. "Somebody is due for considerable explainin' about that hat. Let me know pronto if you happen to see 'em ride in."

Hatfield promised and took his leave of the sheriff.

"But I don't expect to see 'em," he growled moodily as he walked away. "Slipped again! The devils have pulled out. Reckon when they failed yesterday in doin' for Sander they figured the jig was up and they'd better hightail. I expected something like that when Cale Winton told me about Haley borrowin' all that money on his spread, but I didn't expect it to happen so soon. Figured they'd make one more try or two for a killin' before they left. Chances are those telegrams they stole down in Camina gave them considerable of a jolt.

"Haley had undoubtedly already figured me for an Arizona peace officer trying to trail down the bunch that killed Burns Weston, that Arizona Ranger, two years back. Those telegrams told him who I really am and it wasn't illogical for him to jump to the conclusion that I'm workin' with the Arizona outfit. Well, it looks like I've got a long trail ahead of me again, and just when I was figuring I might soon get a chance to drop my loop."

Pondering morosely, he continued to stroll about town. He turned a corner and walked down the former main street of Tunis, now chiefly a row of empty buildings, business having moved to the new section on the mesquite flats. The bank, the post-office, and a warehouse or two were the only establishments still carrying on, and Hatfield knew that these were contemplating an early move.

Suddenly he heard a grind of tires and a clatter of hoofs behind him. He glanced back and saw a wagon rolling down the street. On either side rode men with rifles resting across their saddles. They glanced suspiciously from side to side as they rode.

"That wagon's packin' over the monthly clean-up from the mills," observed a nearby idler who had noted the direction of Hatfield's gaze. "Them mill fellers are gettin' smart. They don't figure to take chances on leavin' the ingots over across the crik with everybody in town for pay-day."

"What they aimin' to do with 'em?" asked Hatfield.

"They're packin' 'em to the bank," he was informed. "That old vault will sure be stuffed with *dinero* tonight. What with the clean-up and the pay-roll money, wouldn't be surprised if they got nigh onto a hundred thousand dollars there. Feller could sort of retire if he had all that."

"He could take a few days off from work, anyhow," Hatfield conceded, with a smile.

Absently he watched the wagon pull up in front of the bank, which adjoined the vacant building that formerly housed Cale Munzer's old Last Chance Saloon. The alert guards took up strategic positions and the unloading began, employees

packing the chunky ingots into the bank.

A few passersby paused to watch the unloading. Hatfield noted two men in range garb who appeared to be unusually interested. They watched until the last brick was unloaded, then their heads drew together in low-voiced conversation. One slowly shook his head, reluctantly, it seemed to Hatfield. Then the pair walked quickly down the street.

The guards were chatting carelessly among themselves now, their rifles thrust back into the boots. Hatfield continued his stroll, on past the flimsy bank building with its brass grill work spanning the floor of the single room and its old-fashioned iron vault.

SUDDENLY the Ranger halted dead in his tracks. His eyes began to glow. He stared straight at the bank building without seeing it.

"I wonder," he muttered. "Darned if I don't believe it might work! By golly, I'm goin' to play a hunch!"

He turned and hurried back up the street. Reaching C Street, he abated his pace somewhat and strolled leisurely into the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Hauser looked up from his desk.

"See 'em ride in?" he asked expectantly.

Hatfield shook his head. "Plenty of others ridin' in, but none of the Rockin' H bunch." He closed the door, moved up a chair and sat down opposite the sheriff. "Want to have a little talk with you," he announced.

"Shoot!" grunted the sheriff. "I won't have any time to talk a little later. Blamed town's already beginnin' to fill up. Most of the spreads paid off this afternoon and the boys are ridin' in to start celebratin' early. There'll be hell hereabouts from now on till Sunday. By the time the rock busters get started tomorrow, the cowhands will be loaded for bear. Business is sure due to pick up. I done swore in four special deputies already."

"Got a notion you'll need 'em," Hatfield said.

As he spoke he laid something on the desk between them. The sheriff's jaw dropped. His eyes widened as he stared at the gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and respected badge of the Texas Rangers.

"Well, I—I'll be damned!" he sputtered. "But I ought to have guessed it before now. You been actin' like a Ranger ever since you landed here. And by golly, feller, I got you placed at last. You're the Lone Wolf! Uh-huh, Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf! That's it." He stared at the man whose exploits were legendary throughout the Southwest.

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted, smiling a little.

"No wonder Milt Sander thought he'd seen you or that you reminded him of somebody he'd heard about," Hauser pursued. "He's been puzzlin' over it ever since the first time he saw you in the Lucky Star."

Hatfield nodded. He recalled Sander's start as of surprised recognition when he walked into the saloon the night of Hatfield's arrival in the section.

"And because of it, Sander had me puzzled about him for a while," Hatfield said. "Hauser, I'm goin' to play a hunch, and I'll need you to help. I believe we've got a chance to drop a loop on the bunch that's been raisin' all the hell hereabouts. And it'll be our last chance, if it works out. They figure to hightail, and pronto. Fact is, till a little while ago, I figured they'd already lit out. Now I'm not so sure, and they might fall for a trap. I'll tell you about it."

He leaned closer, and as he talked the sheriff's expression changed to one of amazement.

"And you really think Arch Haley is runnin' the owlhoot bunch here?" he asked incredulously. "I'd never have believed it!"

"I've been thinkin' so for quite a spell," Hatfield replied. "Since yesterday I've been sure."

"Why since yesterday?"

"Because of the attempt on Milt Sander's life yesterday," Hatfield said slowly.

"But why would Haley want to kill

Sander?" asked the thoroughly bewildered sheriff.

"Haley has had his eye on Mary Winton and old Cale's big holdin's ever since he came back to Texas," Hatfield explained. "He managed to get himself in solid with Winton, and I hear he was doin' pretty well with Mary till Milt Sander come along. That was one of those funny things that happen. Milt and Mary fell hard for each other right from the beginnin'.

"Haley found himself shoved out. The only chance he had to get back in the runnin' was to do away with Sander. He came mighty nigh to doing it, too. But the breaks went against him. And when that happened, I've a notion Haley got pretty bad rattled. He was already plenty jumpy and I guess that just about finished him. He aims to pull out with what's left of his bunch."

The sheriff looked completely flabbergasted.

"And you really think they might make a try for the bank tonight?" he asked.

"I'm playin' a hunch, like I said," Hatfield replied. "I believe they might, if they figure they can get away with it. Most likely there's considerable friction among 'em about now and they're ripe for anything. Besides, the chances are they're all just about busted. Owlhoots never manage to hold onto their pickin's. They lost out on that stage robbery, and a chance for one more big haul before pullin' out would be mighty temptin'."

"You got anything more'n just a hunch to back you up?" asked the sheriff.

"Well—there was a couple of off-color lookin' gents watchin' the wagon unload the ingots, and they was sure plumb interested. I didn't think much of it at the time, then it suddenly occurred to me they might be keepin' tabs for the bunch. If we set the stage right for 'em, and fool 'em with the trick, I'm bettin' they will make the try."

"A feller could almost bust open that old vault with a hand hammer," the sheriff remarked thoughtfully. "And with the bank way over on old Main Street and with everybody in town raisin' hell tonight, it wouldn't be hard to get away with it, that's a fact. I am supposed to have two deputies guardin' the bank tonight, but—"

"You won't have 'em," Hatfield instantly said. "And if the bunch is keepin' a close watch, they'll know it. All set?"

Hauser got to his feet.

"I'll amble over to the bank and put a flea in the ear of the president, old Ward Dudley," he said, "so he won't be haulin' out some guards to take the place of the deputies that won't be there, or at least so far as anybody knows, we hope. I'll pick you up at the Lucky Star. You'll tell John Munzer what to say?"

"Yes, I'll line up Munzer," Hatfield promised. "Let's go."

An hour later, Sheriff Hauser, with his two deputies, Jim Hatfield and four other specials rode out of town and south on the Camina Trail. And Long John Hauser got busy on his part of the performance.

"Hauser got a tip the owlhoot bunch he's been huntin' for the past six months is holed up down there somewhere," the saloonkeeper informed interested hearers. "He's hopin' to drop a loop on 'em tonight."

The word quickly spread around, but the matter soon passed from the minds of most of the citizens who were busy getting started on the pay-day celebration.

CHAPTER XV

The Last Chance

THE POSSE rode south at a swift pace. Hatfield continually glanced over his shoulder. Once, at the end of a straight stretch of nearly a mile, he pulled the posse to a halt in the shadow of a thicket and sat for some time scanning the back trail.

"Don't want to be wearin' a tail tonight, or we may be the ones to get a surprise,"

he told Hauser as they got under way again. "I'm pretty sure I was wearin' one the day I rode to Camina and I'm takin' no chances this time. We're up against a bad bunch and I figure they're pretty desperate about now. A slip-up on our part and the results are likely to be unpleasant for us."

They passed the scene of the attempted stage holdup of a couple of weeks before and turned into the old Raiders' Trail. Where the faint trace by way of which Hatfield had tracked the mysterious owl-hoot leader to the old cabin in the canyon joined the Raiders' Trail they paused again, just at dusk. After a smoke, and a breather for the horses, they rode into the canyon at a greatly reduced pace.

"This crack affords a short-cut back to town," Hatfield explained to Hauser. "And I believe we're safe enough in headin' back now."

"Uh-huh," the sheriff agreed. "I used it the day I rode down here to pick up the bodies of the two hellions you did for that night in the cabin. Don't reckon the sidewinders might be holed up there again tonight, do you?"

"Hardly," Hatfield said. "I don't believe they would have used that hide-out again at all. Chances are they figured it sort of a bad luck place, after what happened there."

Just the same, they approached the cabin with caution. It was dark and deserted, the door sagging open. After another slight pause they rode on.

Reaching the open rangeland they increased their speed until the lights of Tunis came into view. They circled the town and approached it from the north.

Leaving their horses tethered in a grove to the northeast of the outskirts, they proceeded on foot, keeping in the shadow of the cliffs that shouldered close to the settlement. By way of a dark alley they reached the rear of the building formerly occupied by John Munzer's Last Chance Saloon.

Hatfield opened the back door with a key Munzer had given him, and the posse filed silently into the denuded interior of the building. Hatfield unlocked the front door but left it closed. The possemen took up positions by the front windows, from which they could see the front of the bank building, dimly outlined by the light of a lantern hanging on a pole at the corner.

"I figure if they do make a try, it will be by way of the door," Hatfield whispered to Sheriff Hauser.

"That's right," the sheriff whispered back. "The windows are barred, but the door has only an ordinary lock on it. No trouble to pry it open."

A tedious wait followed. Slowly the hours passed, with nothing happening. Midnight drew near. The sounds of revelry from C and D Streets grew louder. Once there was a stutter of gunfire and wild whoops.

"Hope the hellions didn't decide to hit some place else — the Lucky Star, for instance," Hauser muttered uneasily. "Plenty of *dinero* there tonight."

[Turn page]

Distilled from 100% Grain Neutral Spirits — 90 Proof
Mr. Boston Distiller Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

"Just a bunch ridin' in and shootin' holes in the sky, that we're hearin', the chances are," Hatfield reassured him. "The yelps sounded that way."

Another hour passed, with the posse growing restless and nervous, and even Hatfield not as comfortable as he might have been.

"I'm beginnin' to be scared we've rode a blind trail, feller," Sheriff Hauser muttered despairingly.

"Hold it!" Hatfield whispered sharply. "What's that over on the far side of the street?"

FROM the black opening between two buildings something moved. It resolved into a man who stealthily crossed the street. Another and another followed, until Hatfield had counted seven altogether. The group clustered in front of the bank building. The last man turned and a beam from the lantern at the corner fell full on his face.

"Arch Haley!" the sheriff whispered sibilantly. "Feller, you were right!"

"Get set," Hatfield breathed. "Shoot straight when it starts. They won't be taken without a fight."

From the direction of the bank came a creaking sound, as of metal straining against wood.

With Hatfield in the lead, the posse boiled out of the building. On Hatfield's broad chest gleamed the star of the Rangers. His voice rolled in thunder through the silent night:

"In the name of the State of Texas! Arch Haley and you others, you are under arrest!"

The group at the bank door whirled, with yells of alarm. The night air rocked and quivered to a roar of gunfire.

Jim Hatfield raced forward, shooting with both hands. He saw red flashes spurting toward him through the gloom, heard the screech of passing lead, the screams of stricken men, the booming of guns.

A man leaped from the press in front, dashed madly for the opening between the buildings. Hatfield recognized Arch Haley and raced in pursuit. He hoped to take the outlaw leader alive if possible. He lined his gun for a disabling wound and pulled trigger as Haley darted into the opening.

The hammer clicked on an empty shell! Hatfield slammed the Colt into its sheath and leaped in pursuit.

Into the opening he plunged. His reaching hand clutched Haley by the shoulder. Haley whirled about. His gun blazed right in Hatfield's face. The bullet nicked the lobe of the Ranger's left ear. Then his hand closed on Haley's wrist, twisting the gun hand up and back.

There was a moment of furious struggle in the narrow space. Hatfield caught the gleam of a knife and barely eluded the plunging blade that ripped the sleeve of his shirt. He struck out with the clubbed gun in his left hand.

At the same instant a shot thundered between the walls. Arch Haley gave a choking cry and went limp in Hatfield's grip. For an instant the Ranger was at a loss to know what had happened. Then he understood. Haley had accidentally pulled the trigger of his gun with the muzzle twisted back against his own chest.

He was dead when Hatfield hauled his limp form into the open.

A glance told Hatfield that Sheriff Hauser and his men had things under control. Bodies were scattered about. Three disarmed prisoners were lined against the wall of the bank building, their hands in the air.

"Well, reckon that's that," grunted Hauser, wiping blood from his face. "We lost one man. Couple more punctured. Come on, let's head for the calaboose. We'll have half the town here in another two minutes. See you got Haley, feller. Didn't give you the slip this time."

"He got himself," Hatfield replied. "A pity as smart a jigger as he evidently was had to ride the off-trail."

* * * * *

An interested group gathered in Doc Cooper's office the following morning.

Cale Winton was there, and Mary, and John Munzer, and Sheriff Hauser, and Rosa, the old Yaqui woman, who had come up from the ranchhouse to look after Milt Sander.

Hatfield was the center of attention as he recounted and explained details.

"I got my first real break when I found the Arizona Ranger badge in the pocket of a stage robber," he told them all. "That gave me somethin' to work on, and when I learned that Haley had come to Texas from Arizona, it was somethin' of a tie-up. Up till then, I admit, I'd had an eye on Milt Sander. But when I found him at his ranchhouse the day they made the try for the stage down on the Camina Trail, I figured he couldn't be in two places at the same time, so that eliminated him. Right then I hadn't the least notion in the world who to suspect, but Haley proceeded to shove himself into the picture."

He paused to roll and light a cigarette, then resumed.

"Haley dropped a loop on himself when he failed to send the telegram to the capital," he explained. "Right there he proved that he was mixed up in somethin' off-color and didn't want Rangers sent here. Would have been better for him to have sent the message Winton entrusted to him and set tight. The owl-hoot brand always makes slips like that. Then when he made the try for Sander, I was sure of him."

Hatfield pinched out his cigarette butt and tossed it out the window.

"But I still didn't have a thing on him that would stand up in court," he admitted. "Nothing a smart lawyer couldn't make look ridiculous. But Haley didn't know that. As the prisoners we took last night admitted to Sheriff Hauser, Haley and the bunch killed an Arizona Ranger and they were always scared other Rangers were on their trail. When I showed up they jumped to the conclusion that I was one, and got rattled. Haley proceeded to convict himself."

"With a little help from the Lone Wolf," interpolated Sheriff Hauser. "That trap you figured out for him last night gave him his come-uppance."

"Maybe," Hatfield agreed. "Anyhow, it worked out and everything is all set. And now, folks, I'll be ridin'. Sorry I can't stay for the weddin', Mary, but Captain Bill will have another little chore lined up for me by the time I get back to the post."

"And I'm plumb sorry I'm not goin' to get the range boss I hoped to have," said old Cale.

"You've got one," Hatfield said, nodding at Milt Sander. "Good thing you're buildin' that school. Chances are you'll have use for it yourself a few years from now. Reckon you'll make a nice granddad, too. Spoil the kids plenty. *Adios*, now."

They watched him ride away, tall and graceful atop his great golden horse, leaving peace and happiness behind, in place of turmoil and suspicion.

"They call him the Lone Wolf," remarked Milt Sander, "but he reminds me more of a big mountain lion."

"Yes, he's that, all right," Mary Winton said, reaching up to stroke back his unruly hair that kept falling over the bandage. "But I think," she added pensively, "I'd rather have a nice fuzzy bear that will be around when I want him and not go riding off to get into more trouble."

"Good!" grunted old Rosa. "Bear stick around. Stay holed up at home all winter. Big tomcat always go prowlin' off somewhere."

Coming Next Issue: Further Exciting Exploits of Jim Hatfield in LOST RIVER LOOT, Another Action Novel by Jackson Cole

Owlhoot Hunch

by Leslie Ernenwein

Copyright, 1946, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in March, 1946, Rio Kid Western.

DUDE MULQUEEN was sitting on the spur-scarred bench in front of his livery stable when he saw a rider come down the east ridge trail into Broken Bow. Another fiddle-footed Texican, "Dude" guessed. Even a two-year drought on this dried-up range didn't stop Texas drifters from crossing it. Remembering all the strange towns he'd ridden into during the old days, Dude grinned. He'd left some of those towns in a high-tailed hurry.

But the rough-and-tumble times were long gone and Dude Mulqueen was at peace with the world. Like now, as Doc "Parable" Plunkett stopped by on his way to the post office and announced:

"The Mansion House well has gone dry

Dude Mulqueen Figured He Owed Broken Bow Plenty!

again—and not a rain cloud in sight."

Dude tilted his dust-peppered derby at a forty-five-degree angle, took deliberate aim at a horsefly and drenched it with tobacco juice. Then he said solemnly: "Sure goin' to be awful tough on the Soto River frogs if it ever does happen to rain again. Whole generations of them poor frogs ain't never learned how to swim."

"This," Doc Plunkett censured, "is no time for jesting," and tromped over to the post office.

Mulqueen watched the strange rider come slowly along Main Street. Looked like a drifter, all right. Like a sashay sport taking a look-see over the hill.

A reflective smile creased Dude's pudgy face. Many the time he had eased into town like that oncoming galoot, with his gun in a greased holster. He'd been a devil-raiser, for a fact—until *rurale* bullets bored holes in his brisket one moonlight night as he was crossing the Border. A loyal bronc had brought him to Broken Bow more dead than alive, and Parable Plunkett, who was a wizard with gunshot surgery, had saved his life.

Dude told a tall tale of being ambushed by bandits and later, when Fonso Mitchell, the merchant, offered to grubstake him, Dude felt lower than snake sign in a wheel rut. All the folks on Main Street had been so nice to him that he'd decided to reform his ways and spend the rest of his life in Broken Bow. Fifteen years among honest, friendly folks could sure change things aplenty. They could make a man forget he'd ever ridden with the Wild Bunch.

Dude was thinking about that when Parable Plunkett came back across Main Street, moving so swiftly that the tails of his frayed Prince Albert flapped out behind him.

"It's an outrage!" the pompous old medico declared. "A foul and fantastic outrage!"

"Ain't Sid got the mail sorted yet?" Dude inquired, being accustomed to Parable's bombastic outbursts.

"Read that," Doc ordered, and tossed a copy of the Tombstone *Epitaph* into Mulqueen's lap. "It's not bad enough that the perverse antics of Nature threaten our survival in this once fertile region. Now the territorial governor has dealt all Dragoon Basin a dastardly blow!"

"Has he passed a law against rain?" Dude inquired. Then he looked at the paper's front page, his eyes bugging wide as he read:

MORGAN AND RONDEEN PARDONED!

Justice, the blindfolded lady with the dangling scales, was vilely debauched last week when Clark Morgan, erstwhile Broken Bow banker, and his accomplice in crime, Joe Rondeen, received full pardons from the politician who poses as our governor. These two men, jointly convicted of murdering Tate Lambert, were sentenced by Circuit Court Judge Smith to serve fifteen years at Yuma Prison after a jury of twelve upright citizens found them guilty as charged. The evidence against them was conclusive beyond the shadow of a doubt, yet in spite of that, the governor used the pretext that the verdict was prejudiced because Clark Morgan held overdue mortgages on several members of the jury.

Thus, in one foul stroke, convicted murderers were absolved of their heinous crime and the honest citizens of Broken Bow were branded with betrayal of their solemn oath. It is little wonder Judge Smith has declared that in Arizona Territory it is safer to kill a man than to steal a steer!

FINISHED with his reading, Dude Mulqueen handed the paper back to Plunkett. For the first time in years a worried frown marred the well-scrubbed shine on Dude's face.

"It looks bad for Broken Bow," he muttered. "You reckon Morgan will foreclose them mortgages soon as he gets back?"

"Of course he will," Plunkett proclaimed.

As if in dramatic confirmation of that opinion, Fonso Mitchell hurried across Main Street's wide dust.

"Here's a legal notice from Morgan," he announced, "signed and sealed in Tucson, warning me of mortgage foreclosure upon demand!"

Close behind the old merchant came Fritz Elmendorf, proprietor of the Fancy Lady Saddle Shop.

"It is impossible," he complained, "for

me to pay Clark Morgan until my customers pay their bills!"

"And they can't do that until they drive their beef to Bowie—which means another month at least," Mitchell muttered hopelessly. "Morgan has us nailed to the cross. A week from now it'll be the Morgan Mercantile, the Morgan Hotel, and the devil knows how many more places he'll grab."

Afterward, while other men grimly called for their mail and received the dreaded notices, Dude Mulqueen sat on his bench, sadly sharing the bitter sense of futility and frustration which assailed his friends. Even though Morgan held no mortgage against Dude's ramshackle livery, which was next to worthless, the impending disaster had very personal implications. Mulqueen wouldn't want to live in a town dominated by the rapacious, hog-jowled banker. Broken Bow would be just another wide place in the stage road without the tried but true friends whose generous goodwill had given him a new lease on life fifteen years ago.

So deep and dismal was the run of Dude's thinking that he ignored completely the strange rider's presence until the Texican unsaddled his horse.

"What stall you want me to use?" he heard a voice ask.

Then Mulqueen looked at the stranger's face for the first time—and sensing something familiar about it, wondered where he had seen him before. There was a fleeting moment when Dude thought he might have met this bleak-eyed man while riding with the Wild Bunch. The Texan had a wary, trail-smoke look about him, and he was wearing a Walker model Colt in half-breed holster—a gun made for men who knew how to use a gun.

But almost at once Dude decided he'd never seen this galoot in the old days. The drifter wasn't more than twenty-five, which meant he'd been a slick-eared kid of ten when Dude was fancy-dancing down the back trails.

"Use that first stall beyond my tackroom," the liveryman said.

The stranger put his horse away and joined Mulqueen on the bench. But he didn't offer to talk. He took out a knife and proceeded to pare his fingernails, glancing frequently at various establishments along Main Street. Dude thought he looked longest at Morgan's locked bank.

Presently, when the drifter sauntered over to Lee Sing's Shanghai Cafe for supper, Dude saw him glance through the bank's cobwebbed front window. Which was when a hunch hit Dude hard as the kick of a long-yearling calf.

"By grab!" he exclaimed, and hurried into the barn for a look at the Texan's horse.

If his hunch was correct, the bronc would probably be wearing one of those curlycue bug brands the Mexicans used below the Border.

Dude peered at the stranger's horse, a short-coupled dun gelding built close to the ground. No mark on his left hip, nor his right one either, far as Dude could make out. But it was after sundown now and almost dark in here, so Mulqueen got the lantern which hung in the barn doorway.

No telling where a Mexican might brand a horse. Could be so high on the hip you'd have to be hossback to see it. Maybe right or left shoulder, or near anywhere except on his tail.

Dude lit the lantern, went back to the stall and presently loosed a satisfied sigh. There it was, all spraddled out like a drunkard's dream, on the dun's left shoulder—a sort of squabble-O-and-slash design that no brand inspector would even attempt to untangle.

Smilingly, in the fashion of a man at peace with the world, Dude went back to his bench. If his hunch was right, there'd be a good chance to save his friends from Morgan's mortgage foreclosings.

Of course there was still no real proof that he'd tallied the drifter correctly. Just because a man rode a bug-branded bronc didn't mean he was a bank robber. But that fact, added to the back-trail look of him and the way he'd sized up Morgan's

bank, sure gave a galoot a right to guess and to do a mite of planning. For if the Texican was bent on committing larceny in Broken Bow, Dude intended to have it done in the right place.

IT WAS almost dark when the drifter came out of the Shanghai Cafe. Dude watched him close, wanting to observe if he gave the bank another look-see, and was disappointed when the stranger walked past the building without so much as a side glance. But presently, when the Texican sauntered up to the bench and sat down, he asked a question that boosted Dude's hunch aplenty.

"I heard in Tombstone you had a sheriff here. Ain't he in town?"

"So that's it!" Dude thought. "He read that piece in the paper and figgered to tap Morgan's bank before the big buzzard returns."

"Well," Mulqueen replied, hastily searching for the right words, "we got a windbroke old codger named Sam Odegarde who passes hisself off as a sheriff, but he's up in the Fandango Hills helpin' with the beef gather."

"So?" the stranger mused. Then he asked, "Sort of early for beef roundup, ain't it?"

"Yes—and no," Dude hedged. "It's early by the calendar, but too darn late other ways. It ain't rained around here for so long that the gophers have set up housekeepin' in the Soto River bed. The cowmen kept hangin' and rattlin' with the idea it would rain if they waited long enough. But it didn't and now they've got to drive their cattle to market while the critters are still able to walk. They'll probably make it and pay off the bills they owe here in town, but not in time to save several friends of mine from losin' their places to Clark Morgan."

The Texican shaped up a cigarette and lit it, his frowning face showing briefly in the match flare.

"Morgan," he muttered, "should've been hung instead of being put in prison."

"That's what a lot of us thought at the time," Dude agreed. "But even so, we never figgered he'd get pardoned—him and his paid killer." Then, wanting to get the talk back to the important subject, Mulqueen declared, "Nobody in this town has any cash money on hand. Every time a cowman comes to town he eats on credit at the Shanghai, drinks on credit at the Alhambra, and buys his provisions the same way at the Mercantile. The only hard cash in Broken Bow is what Clark Morgan left behind him."

"So?" the drifter prompted and it seemed to Dude that he leaned a little closer, as if anxious to hear more about it.

"Yeah, but Morgan didn't leave it in his bank. He's slick—slicker'n slime on a watering trough. He figgered a closed bank would be a big temptation for a robbery, so he put a whole mess of cash money into a bag, along with some mortgages, and turned it over to the Wells Fargo agent here for safekeeping."

Mulqueen took time out to watch Parable Plunkett and Fonso Mitchell cross Main Street on their way to the Alhambra Saloon.

"That Wells Fargo safe don't amount to much," he observed slowly. "I'd be willing to bet the best horse in my barn against a burro that I could take that pinch bar leanin' against the bench and bust the lock off that old safe in ten minutes time."

Whereupon Dude called out to his two friends.

"I'll buy the drinks if my credit ain't played out," he said, and hurriedly joined them.

For upward of three hours, while frowning men gathered at the Alhambra's rosewood bar, Dude listened to the glum talk of his friends. It was as if these men were attending their own wake.

"'Tis a sad and sorrowful day," mourned Shaemus O'Shea, dispensing bourbon without benefit of coin.

"Twenty years," Fonso Mitchell muttered, "takin' the dry ones as they came, and never stoppin' a cowman's credit. Now I'll have to start all over again—just because I stood up for the law."

"And it is the same law Morgan uses to take our places," Fritz Elmendorf reflected.

"If Morgan didn't have them mortgages in his possession he couldn't foreclose 'em, could he?" Dude asked casually.

"What a stupid question!" Parable Plunkett proclaimed, hoisting his fifth drink with the dignity of a man two-thirds drunk. "Of course Morgan must possess the documents, otherwise he'd have no legal proof they existed."

"Reckon I better go home and break the news to Ruth," mumbled Luke Medwick, whose wife had recently presented him with his fourth son. "She'll need a tol'able time to pack all the gewgaws she's collected in fifteen years."

Dude left the saloon with Medwick, and seeing that the bench in the livery's lantern-lit doorway was vacant, felt a great surge of exultation. By grab! The drifter might've robbed the Wells Fargo safe already. Might even be hightailing for the tules with Morgan's sack of money and mortgages right now!

REALIZATION of what that would mean to Broken Bow made Dude feel bigger than Billy-be-damn. Fonso Mitchell and Fritz and Luke and all the others could keep their places. They could pay Morgan off when they pleased. And that meant Dude Mulqueen had finally paid off the debt of gratitude he'd owed here so long. Because, except for him telling the Texican where the money was, that hombre would've wasted his efforts on the bank.

That thought, added to the whisky glow five glasses of bourbon had given him, put a pleasant warmth in Dude. A most pleasant warmth indeed.

"Don't tell your wife the bad news tonight, Luke," Mulqueen advised. "No use to spoil her night's sleep for nothin'. I got a good hunch Morgan will wait for his money—and be darn glad to get it after beef roundup."

"You drunk?" Medwick asked, eying him as they came to the barn doorway.

Dude smiled slyly. "Mebbeso," he drawled. "Leastways, I ain't felt so good in fifteen years."

That seemed to puzzle Luke Medwick and he went off down the street muttering to himself. It was just as Dude was about to enter the barn that he noticed the rusty pinchbar leaning against the bench. That startled him. What in blazes had the drifter used to bust off the safe's lock?

Then it occurred to Dude that a bank robber would most likely tote his own tools, and he recalled that there'd been a blanket roll behind the drifter's saddle. But in this same instant he saw that the Bug-branded dun was still in its stall.

Dude gawked at the dun's rump in wide-eyed astonishment. He shook his head dazedly and glanced into his tack-room. There was the drifter's saddle, upended on the floor!

Dude cursed. What if the Texican was just a cussed drifter, taking a look-see over the hill? Just a sashay sport, fancy-dancing through the hills, admiring of his shadows?

With that dismal thought building stronger and stronger in his mind, Dude walked to the Mansion Hotel and spoke to Johnathan Peppersal, a meek, pursy-mouthed man who'd inherited the hotel from an old maid aunt.

"Did a tallish stranger take a room with you?" Dude inquired.

"Yes, indeed," Peppersal said, his Adam's apple bobbing above the loose rim of his celluloid collar. "Another Smith from Texas, so I made him pay in advance.

"Damnation!" Dude blurted. "Blood, fire and corruption!"

Peppersal's fluttery fingers came up in a gesture of excited concern.

"Shouldn't I have rented Smith a room?" he asked nervously.

"You," Dude muttered, "should drink more and talk less."

Like a tired old man, he trudged back to his livery and dropped onto the doorway bench. All the glow was gone from him now. All the fine warmth and exultation vanished. Coldness slogged through

him like sleet through a wornout slicker.

That Texican had sure fooled him aplenty, asking about the sheriff and looking at the bank the way he did. Riding a bug-branded bronc and wearing a Walker model gun, he'd looked like a bank-buster from here to who laid the chunk. But he was just another drifter, just another saddle tramp making horse tracks in the dust.

Wearily, Dude took down the lantern and carried it into his tackroom. He had one boot off and was tugging at the other when he happened to glance at the dust-covered gun gear he'd hung on the wall so long ago. Web-spinning spiders had caught countless flies between its trigger guard and bone handle, and had built permanent nests in the half-breed holster.

Looking at it now, Dude recalled his long-forgotten past, as he had when he'd seen the drifter ride into town. But now he was remembering something else—the sly statement he'd made out front three hours ago:

"I could take that pinchbar leanin' against the bench and bust the lock off that old safe in ten minutes time."

It wasn't far from Mulqueen's livery to the Wells Fargo office. But it seemed like a mile to Dude, the longest mile he'd ever walked. Main Street was entirely dark now, not a light showing. Dude strode down the middle of the street, his boots making scarcely any sound in the wheel-rutted dust. He carried the pinchbar wrapped in a burlap bag close to his side, so that it wouldn't be noticed if he should meet some homeward-bound townsman.

This, Dude guessed, was probably the first time any galoot ever started out to commit robbery without a gun. But because there wasn't a man in Broken Bow he'd shoot at—not even crusty old Joe Creel, the Wells Fargo agent—Dude hadn't put on his gun gear. Anyway, no one would hear him if he took his time. Joe Creel would be at his home on Residential Avenue, probably sound asleep by now. The Wells Fargo office was far enough from the Mansion House so that there was slight chance of him disturbing even a light sleeper there.

Dude was passing Pelky's Barbershop when the clock atop the courthouse belfry bonged out the hour. Two a.m. Somewhere in Burrow Alley a dog began barking, and when Duke crossed the intersection of Fremont Street he noticed that a light was burning in one house on Residential Avenue. A soft breeze swept down from the Fandango Hills. It seemed to have a smell of rain in it, but because Dude's mind was set on the task ahead he paid that notion slight heed.

He was within a hundred feet of his goal when a thought came to him that made him halt at once. Even though Sheriff Sam Odegarde probably wouldn't suspect him of this job, Wells Fargo would send a detective here *muy pronto*. That outfit was touchy as six snakes at skin-shedding time. They'd spend a thousand dollars to get back ten that was stolen from 'em. And if their detective happened to be an old-timer from Texas, he might recognize Dude Mulqueen as being a member of the old Wild Bunch!

For a long moment then, Dude stood undecided. Until he recalled how his friends had looked and talked over there at the Alhambra Saloon tonight. Fonso Mitchell, who had seemed to age in a few hours' time. Luke Medwick, who had dreaded to break the news to his wife. And her with a week-old baby.

SO DUDE shrugged and went on toward the Wells Fargo office. Fifteen years, he guessed, had changed his looks along with his ways, and there wasn't much chance an outside lawman would tally his past. What chance there was he'd take, by grab, and to blazes with it!

"Who's there?" a voice called sharply.

Joe Creel's voice! It came from directly ahead, from the Wells Fargo doorway.

"Speak up, speak up!" Creel commanded. "I got a gun and I'll use it!"

"It's me, Joe," Dude replied hastily, and wondered why in tarnation Creel was here at this time of night.

"I thought you was somebody else, Dude," the agent explained. "I thought you was that tough-eyed drifter that rode in just before dark. I figgered he might be a bandit, and that's why I'm here."

Dude loosed a long sigh. "I was wonderin' about him myself," he observed. "Couldn't seem to sleep." He forced a fake yawn and added, "Guess I'll go give it another try."

The trip back to his livery seemed a lot shorter to Dude Mulqueen. But presently, when he pulled off his boots and glanced at his gun gear again, an idea came that made him curse aloud, and he lay for hours without sleeping. An idea that seemed fantastic, yet so simple that it would almost surely save his friends from ruin—if he'd pay the price it cost.

Dude was still thinking about that price when he finally went to sleep, It was the first thing he thought of when he awoke next day, to find he'd slept until nearly noon.

The drifter was sitting on the bench when Dude came out of his tackroom.

"Fed and watered the stock," he reported, idly paring his nails.

"Much obliged," Dude muttered.

He noticed that the drifter had shaved and put on a clean shirt, and thought he didn't look so tough. In fact he didn't look tough at all, now that Dude knew he was no bank robber. Yet there was something remotely familiar about the Texican's face.

Dude ate dinner at the Shanghai Cafe and tried to ignore the fantastic scheme which kept nagging his mind. Heck, he told himself, he'd tried to pay off his debt of gratitude last night. It wasn't his fault that crusty old Joe Creel had spoiled his efforts. Besides, there was no telling just when Morgan and Rondeen would return. They might be on today's stage, or they might not come for a week.

The smell of rain was strong in the sultry air when Dude sauntered back along Main Street, prying at his teeth with a toothpick. Thunderheads boiled above the Fandango Hills and the aromatic odor of wet greasewood rode a rising wind. Fonso Mitchell stood on the Mercantile stoop, gazing at the cloud-filled sky.

"Looks like the real thing this time," he predicted. But there was no cheerfulness in his voice. "Rain won't help us here when Morgan comes back," he added. "And I've got a hunch he's coming today."

All along Main Street it was the same—men looking glumly at the thunderheads, when they should've been smiling in anticipation of rain. And it was the same with Dude Mulqueen. Even though a good downpour would fill water-holes and save what remained of summer graze, it wouldn't help his friends here in Broken Bow. It'd just mean that Clark Morgan would take over in time to reap the benefit.

Dude cursed to himself. He couldn't sit by and see Morgan ruin this town, even though his, Dude's, scheme meant he'd have to leave Broken Bow. Even if it meant taking up the renegade ways he had discarded here fifteen years ago!

Reluctantly, in the fashion of a man doing a dreaded chore, Duke made his preparations. Taking a blanket from his bunk, he stowed his few personal belongings in it and rolled it behind his saddle. Then he buckled on his gun gear. If Morgan and Rondeen returned today there'd be two men in town he could shoot at—two snakes that needed stomping for what they'd done to Tate Lambert.

According to the courthouse clock, the stage was due any minute. Dude took a final look at the tackroom which had been his abode for so long. This, he reflected, was probably the last real home he'd ever know. And he'd be leaving the only real friends he'd ever had when he left Broken Bow. There was a slogging regret in him when he led his horse through the stable's rear doorway and, climbing into saddle, rode slowly along Burro Alley.

A steadily rising wind swept up dust and rattled tin cans in this trash-littered lane. It felt cool against the back of

Dude's neck. There was rain somewhere behind the wind. Probably raining in the Fandango Hills right now. But Dude took no pleasure in that thought at all. He was calculating the moves he would soon have to make.

First thing was to reach the passageway between Fritz Elmendorf's saddle shop and the Wells Fargo building without being seen. Then he'd have to wait until Clark Morgan got the moneybag from Creel. The banker, Dude guessed, would lose no time repossessing his money and mortgages. He'd probably start his backhanded foreclosure deals without delay. He was that kind of a coyote.

DUDE dismounted behind the Wells Fargo office and tied his horse to a stoop post. He was easing between the buildings when he heard the stage rumble into town from the west. If Morgan and Rondeen were aboard, this deal would be soon over.

Almost at once Dude heard the creak of the Concord's brake blocks and knew it had stopped. Then he heard Clark Morgan's voice.

"You ready to pay off, Mitchell—you and the others?" the banker called out.

There was no reply, and Dude guessed that Fonso had merely shook his head, for Morgan's loud voice came again.

"I'll be right over with the mortgage, and Joe Rondeen will act as witness."

That declaration was followed by Rondeen's gloating laughter and his warning: "Anybody thinks he can't foreclose them mortgages *muy pronto* better have a gun in their fist!"

Dude hurried forward then, wanting to be close enough to make his play the moment Morgan came out with the moneybag. And he'd sure as rain have a gun in his fist when he stepped out onto the sidewalk, just like Rondeen had suggested. After that it should be simple. He'd cover the two ex-convicts with his gun and make 'em hand over the bag. Then he'd hightail for the tules. The thought that he'd never dare set foot in Broken Bow again made him curse softly. Of course, Morgan and Rondeen might decide to fight. In which case he'd live long enough to cut down the hog-jawed banker.

So thinking, Dude drew his gun and was in the act of taking his first look at the street, when he heard a voice call sharply: "Just a minute, Morgan!"

That voice sounded strange to Dude. He couldn't identify it, until he looked around the building's corner and saw the

Throw Away
NICOTINE*
Switch to
MEDICO
FILTER
PIPES
MEDICO
THROW AWAY NICOTINE
Box of
10 filters—10¢
*When filter turns brown—in Medico Pipes or Cigarette Holders—throw it away, with the nicotine, juices, flakes and tars it has trapped. Insert fresh filter for cooler, cleaner, dryer, sweeter smoking.
MEDICO V.F.Q.
(Very Fine Quality)
Pipes of fine selected imported briar.
With 10 filters—$2
MEDICO MEDALIST
Just Introduced! Pipes of the choicest imported briar.
Splendid value—$1.50
Wide variety of styles and sizes.
Write S. M. Frank & Co., N. Y., for Booklet T
MEDICO CIGARETTE HOLDERS—$1

Texas drifter ten feet away—with his right hand hovering close to holster!

"Who the devil are you?" Morgan demanded, a scowl wrinkling his untanned face.

The drifter ignored that question. Instead of answering it, he asked one of his own.

"Are you Clark Morgan?" he inquired.

"I am—if it's any of your goldarned business," the banker declared arrogantly.

The Texican glanced at Rondeen.

"Are you Joe Rondeen?" he asked curtly.

"Yeah—and who in Hades are you?" Rondeen asked.

"Name of Lambert," the drifter announced. "Tex Lambert—brother of the man you murdered."

DUDE MULQUEEN gulped, and stared, and knew suddenly why the Texican's face had seemed familiar. And in this fleeting instant of realization he heard Tex Lambert say softly, almost whisperingly:

"You two should've hung for killin' my brother in cold blood. Now I'm givin' you ten seconds to beat my draw!"

For a strangely suspended moment Dude thought neither Morgan nor Rondeen would make a play for their guns. They stood stiff and unmoving, like men frozen beyond the power of movement. And in this hushed interval came Tex Lambert's measured counting: "One—two—three—four—"

Then Clark Morgan grabbed for his shoulder-holstered gun.

The rest of it was almost too fast for Dude to follow. Though Morgan's draw seemed snake-dart fast, Lambert's gun blasted first, driving a slug into the big banker and knocking him back. Lambert fired again, and Dude saw the upward arc of Joe Rondeen's gun halt abruptly. The lean killer took three mincing steps sideward, tripped over Morgan's sprawled body and fell face down.

Which was when Dude noticed that it was raining—hard.

Afterward, when Tex Lambert had ridden off on his bug-branded bronc, Dude Mulqueen stood with Parable Plunkett in the stable's lantern-lit doorway and watched sheets of rain form puddles in Main Street.

"My hunch about the drifter was half right, anyway," Dude mused.

"What are you mumblin' about?" Plunkett inquired.

"Just an owlhoot hunch," Mulqueen replied dryly.

It was almost dark as night now, but Broken Bow had never looked brighter to Dude Mulqueen. Lamplight glowed cheerily from doorways where men stood watching the rain with smiles on their faces. The long drought was over. The threat of foreclosed mortgages was gone. And Dude Mulqueen was still here in Broken Bow where he belonged. Just thinking about it made a feller's throat feel lumpy.

"Why," Parable Plunkett demanded, "are you standing there with tears in your eyes?"

"I was thinkin' about them poor Soto River frogs that ain't never learned to swim," Dude drawled, wiping his eyes. "They'll all drown sure as rain!"

Captain Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, joins other famous Western pioneers in a war on grim outlaw hordes in DEADLINE WEST OF DODGE, in a novel by Walker A. Tompkins in the July issue of—

THE RIO KID WESTERN

NOW ON SALE—20c AT ALL STANDS

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Who was Big Foot Wallace?—R. McC. (Tenn.).

A.—W.A.A. (Big Foot) Wallace was a Texas Ranger under Capt. John C. Hays, later a captain in a Texas regiment in the Mexican War. He was a humorous character as well as a brave fighter. While a prisoner in Mexico City, the Mexicans harnessed him and other prisoners to small carts for hauling dirt for street repair, but they had to give it up because almost every day Big Foot pulled a wild, snorting runaway—with plenty of comedy. Later in life he drove a stage from Austin to El Paso. Born 1817, died 1899.

Q.—While traveling in the West, will I be allowed to dig up cactus or other plants from along the highway to take home with me?—SH. V. (N. C.).

A.—Most Western states (New Mexico for one) have laws forbidding the removal of plants along highways. Better ask local authorities. Better still, ask some ranchman. He'll probably be glad to let you dig all the cactus you want.

Q.—I see lots of illustrations of stories in magazines showing smoke curling from the muzzles of sixshooters just fired. Is this correct?—E. E. T. (Fla.).

A.—If it is a story of the Old West when black powder was still in use, yes, but modern firearms using smokeless powder make no smoke that you can see.

Q.—How do you pronounce *coyote*?—N. A. J. (Ohio).

A.—Correct Spanish pronunciation is co-YO-tay, but the Anglo pronunciation KI-ote is most commonly used, even in the West.

Q.—What does the term "lazy" mean when used to name or describe a brand—as the Lazy O?—L. F. (Ga.).

A.—I can't figure how there could be a Lazy O, because "lazy" means a letter or numeral lying on its side. My own brand, for instance, is Lazy S B — ∽ B.

Q.—I have read about Cripple Creek, Colo., as a rip-roaring mining camp. How did it get such an odd name?—K. W. H. (Minn.).

A.—The story is that some cowboys broke an old cow's leg while dragging her out of a bog and thereafter called the stream Cripple Creek, all prior to the gold strike.

Q.—Do cowhorses have to be kept shod all the time while working cattle?—Shorty (Conn.).

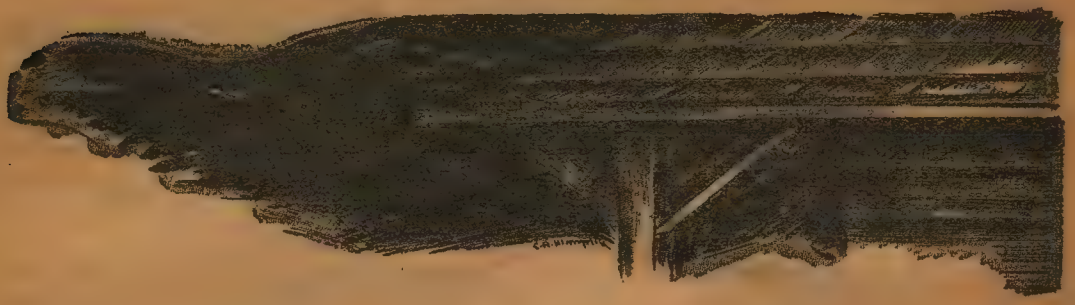
A.—In general it's a good idea, but it depends a lot on the type of country. In sandy or soft-grounded country, with no rocks to speak of, lots of cow work is done on unshod horses, as was also true on many of the old-time trail drives. But where there are many rocks there have to be horseshoes.

Q.—Why did so many stagecoach guards, as I read in stories, carry sawed-off shotguns instead of regular length?—J. N. G. (N. Y.).

A.—Because the shorter weapon was easier to carry and handle, quicker to aim, and the buckshot would cover a bigger target pattern from a short barrel.

—S. Omar Barker

TRAITORS' BLOOD IS RED



a novelet by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

CHAPTER I

Stage Ride

THE guns of Gettysburg were stilled, and the slowly dying sound of their violence ran its echoing path across the continent. Bill Farnum, riding the southbound stage from Portland, stared at the Coast Mountains, almost lost now in the mist driven in from the ocean, and wondered if Gettysburg was the high tide of the Confederacy. Then Lois Stone stirred and touched his arm.

"How soon will we be in Salem?" the girl asked.

"Long time yet," the big man across from Lois answered quickly. "Well past midnight."

"Or later," the dark slim man added.

There were thoughts other than the war in Bill Farnum's mind. His pulse quickened as it always did when he felt Lois's body against his. To strangers she was his wife, but privately she held him at arm's length exactly as she had that first day when they had left Missouri.

Lois had made herself clear from the first. "I want to go to Oregon. The wagon train leaving tomorrow will go fast. I'll give you one thousand dollars to take me."

"I can't do it. All the women in the outfit are wives."

She had smiled then, and for the first time he noticed how pretty she was. Slender, blue-eyed, hair as red-gold as a vine maple leaf in fall, she had seemed to Farnum to be everything he had ever dreamed about in a woman. When he had first seen her, she had been tight-lipped, too sober, too intent upon some grim, unspoken purpose. Then the smile had cut the grimness from her face.

"Does a thousand dollars interest you?" she asked.

"I said that only wives are permitted."

She waved the objection aside. "I've got to go to Oregon. You're traveling light and you've got good horses. If it's the money, I'll pay."

He was a little exasperated then. "We're starting too early," he said. "It'll be a hard trip." He paused, studying her and thinking that a woman in the wagon might, if there were Copperheads in the outfit, keep anyone from suspecting his own purpose in making the trip. "I doubt

Copyright, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and

Detoured by Secessionist foes, Bill Farnum escorted Lois Stone westward on a vengeance trail fraught with peril

Carradine turned his gun on the girl

if you have a good reason for taking this risk."

"I have an excellent reason, Mr. Farnum."

"What?"

She was grim then, and tight-lipped as she had been. "I'll travel as your wife, Mr. Farnum, as far as the others in the train know," she said. "I'll make you no trouble, but I want you to understand two things. I'll not discuss my reasons for going, and I have a gun I'll use the instant you overstep propriety."

"You think the gun is necessary?"

originally published in April, 1947, Thrilling Western

"No. That's the reason I asked you instead of one of the other men."

HE had stared at her a long time, feeling a new warmth wash through him. For two years he had been surrounded by violence.

Now he was plunging into another whirlpool of it, but whatever her purpose was, he could not tell her his mission. He could trust nobody. These two years had taught him that. He would have to make her hate him before they reached Oregon. No matter how much he loved her, and he had known then that he would, he had to make her hate him! If he didn't he'd talk to her, tell her who and what he was, and he could not risk that.

So he had spat into the dust, rubbed the back of his big hand across his mouth.

"All right," he growled. "Get the money for me by night. Bring your stuff out here. I haven't got time to go after any female raggletaggle."

She had wanted to go to Salem. That was the end of his obligation. Now, within two hours, it would be over. The thought gave him a sharp thrust of regret. He'd been rough. Too rough. Perhaps he'd made her hate him. He didn't know. He did know she'd held up her end of the job. She'd fooled even the discerning wives in the wagon train.

"You gonna live in Salem, ma'am?" the big man across asked.

She laid a hand on Farnum's meaty forearm. "My husband and I are staying there for a few days."

Her tone was dismissal enough, but the big man was not one to be discouraged easily. "Salem's purty crowded these days, but maybe I can help you. I've got a good hotel north of town."

"We'll go on into Salem." She turned her head to stare at the Cascades.

Farnum felt a wicked enjoyment at the way Lois had cut the man off. There was silence then, and Farnum turned again to look westward to where the dying sun had spread its final glory across the clouds.

A vague uneasiness had risen in him. This was an old road to Bill Farnum, one he had traveled a dozen times before he had gone East after the news of the attack on Fort Sumter had reached Oregon. They were now not more than two hours travel from Salem, and he wondered why that huge fellow had told Lois it would be after midnight before they arrived.

The big man had taken seat in the stage at Portland when Farnum and Lois had. The dark one had joined them at Oregon City. Farnum liked neither of them, although he had no definite reason for his feeling. The dark man had been called Mr. Burrow in a courteous, respectful tone, but Burrow had called the big man Wade in a tone that was no more than coolly civil. There was, Farnum saw, an officer-soldier relation between the two, and it puzzled him.

They came to a stage station, changed horses, and wheeled on into the gathering dusk. The fir-green Cascades died in the night, and darkness came around them, and there was no sound but the plop of hoofs in the dust and the clang of wheels on rocks.

Lois pressed closer against Farnum, but he was hardly conscious of her. There was something about their fellow passengers that disturbed him, that sent a warning tingle along his spine, and Bill Farnum had lived too long in the shadow of a violent death to disregard such warnings. Strangely enough, it was not the big talkative Wade who worried Farnum. Rather it was the slim dark Burrow.

Silence ran on inside the swaying coach, and constraint fashioned a barrier across it.

Farnum, staring at the shadowy figure of Burrow in the opposite seat, pictured the man's expressionless black eyes, the heavy mustache that hid his mouth, the long-boned body that held a reserve of both strength and speed. Now, searching his mind for a clue that would explain his feeling about Burrow, he found himself unable to put his fingers upon anything definite, but the feeling grew with the passing of time.

"It will be too late to see the Adjutant-General tonight, won't it, Bill?" Lois asked.

She said it loudly enough for Burrow and Wade to hear. Farnum heard Wade's suppressed oath that died in a sharper exclamation of pain. Farnum, smiling in the darkness, thought that both men had involuntarily characterized themselves. Wade had let surprise betray him, and Burrow, never one to lose his self-control, had dug him with an elbow or stamped him with a foot.

"What do you want to see the Adjutant-General for?" Farnum asked.

"I have some things to tell him. We'll hunt him up in the morning."

Hunting up the Adjutant-General was not part of Farnum's agreement with the girl. He had business of his own with that official. He'd be done with Lois the minute they reached Salem, and it was a good thing. She'd served her purpose for him.

AHEAD lights bloomed starlike alongside the road. "This is the hotel I mentioned," Wade said. "You'll stay here tonight."

"What makes you think I'll stay here because you tell me to?" Lois asked curiously.

"Because you're smart."

"Maybe you figure I'll stay, too?" Farnum asked.

"Makes me no difference. If you want to stay here with your pretty wife, I guess you can."

"Go to the devil," Farnum said, anger crowding him into a rashness that was not like him.

Burrow acted then, and in a way Farnum did not expect. Without warning the dark man smashed into him, knocking Lois away with a side sweep of his arm.

Farnum drove a fist into Burrow's face, tried to throw him off, tried to get a hand inside his coat and grip his gun, but Burrow clung to him, keeping Farnum's hands tied up until Wade brought a gun barrel down across Farnum's head.

"Blasted slow," Burrow breathed, and sank back into his own seat.

"Sorry," Wade apologized, "I thought you'd wait till we got to Lytell's."

"Who are you?" Lois demanded in a haughty voice.

Burrow's laugh was a soft mocking sound. "You aren't surprised, are you, Miss Stone?"

"Of course I'm surprised. Even border ruffians—"

"It's a long ways from Missouri," Burrow cut in. "It would take more than a woman's whim to bring you here. I don't think we can afford to let you talk to the Adjutant-General, Miss Stone."

"I'm Mrs. Farnum."

"You were Lois Stone in Missouri. The pretense is unnecessary now. We know a good deal about each other. At least I'm sure I can't turn you loose. My neck will feel safer when you're dead."

Farnum's heavy-crowned hat had kept his head from taking the full impact of Wade's gun. He came to in time to hear what Burrow said, but he made no motion. Wade had pulled out Farnum's gun and had settled his big body between Farnum and Lois, his revolver muzzle prodding Farnum's ribs.

"You'll kill me then?" Lois asked.

"If it was entirely in my hands, yes," Burrow admitted. "But I'm not the one who passes sentence."

"Who does?"

"Sam Lytell."

"Who's he?"

"Just another secessionist now, but there'll be a day when he's governor of Oregon. Or perhaps president of the Pacific Republic."

Farnum knew Lytell. The man had been a federal office-holder in 1860 and had loudly supported the Breckenridge-Lane ticket. But politics had caught up with him, and he had lost his office with the coming in of the Lincoln administration.

"He'll never live to see that day," Lois said scornfully. "The South is done."

"The combination of Gettysburg and Vicksburg would finish the South if it

doesn't get help, but it will get that help."

"Great Britain won't intervene."

"Not Great Britain. There will be an uprising here on the Pacific Coast led by the Knights of the Golden Circle. I'm also counting on the Order of the American Knights, formerly the *Corps de Belgique*. Coming from Missouri, you've heard of it?"

"I've heard of it," Lois admitted.

"Two such uprisings in supposedly loyal territory would give the South the aid it needs."

"Your job is to help the uprising get started on the Pacific Coast?"

"The Stones have always been a smart family," Burrow said mockingly. "I see that you carry out the tradition."

A freezing had set in around Bill Farnum's heart. Burrow wouldn't talk like this unless he was certain of what lay ahead. For Farnum to die at twenty-four with so much of life before him was bad enough; but to die without having a chance to do the job he'd been sent back to his home to do, was something he could not bear to think about.

Lois moved a little to sit closer to Burrow.

"Thanks for the compliment," she said. "At least I'm smart enough to make a deal."

"You have something to offer a man," Burrow admitted, "But it isn't like a Stone to offer a deal."

Lois had pulled a small pistol from inside her coat, and slid it across her lap.

"Your man has a gun on my husband. Now I have one on you. Perhaps you'd care to make a deal, Mr. Burrow."

"I think not," Burrow said softly. "You haven't a chance."

Farnum didn't know what Burrow meant, and judging from Lois's silence, she didn't either. Then he understood. The stage had come to a stop, and a small, fiercely mustached man had pulled the door open. He held a lantern high in one hand, a long-barreled revolver in the other.

"Climb down, folks!" he said. "This is the end of the ride."

CHAPTER II

Trial

A MOMENT of silence followed. It was broken by Wade's deep laugh. "She's smart, Plez, but she didn't know how well we'd planned this," he said.

"Don't take any chances, Carradine," Burrow called out. "That toy she's got would make a nasty hole in a man."

"We don't want to lose you now that you've come this far, Mr. Burrow," Carradine said. "Get down, ma'am. I never shot a female. I'd hate to do it now, but I'm certain sure you ain't goin' to live long if you pull the trigger of that there pistol."

Farnum was watching this strange, tight drama, but he had no opportunity to take part in it.

"They've got all the aces, Lois," he said. By the thin light of the lantern, he saw how pale her face was, how much indecision there was in her. He said again, "They've got us cold-decked, Lois. We'll play the cards they give us."

"You're plumb right you will," Carradine snarled, his green little eyes sharp and wicked. "Put your pistol on the seat and climb down."

Slowly Lois turned her eyes from Plez Burrow to Farnum. Then she obeyed. Farnum climbed over Wade and stepped to the ground. Burrow and Wade followed.

"All right, Ed!" Carradine called to the driver. "If anybody asks you about passengers, tell 'em they stayed the night at Lytell's."

"Don't be a fool," Burrow shouted. "Say you didn't have any passengers. We don't want the Adjutant-General's spies tracing them out here."

"Tell 'em what I said," Carradine growled, and started to turn his gun on Burrow. Then he lowered it. "I'm giving orders here, Mr. Burrow, till Sam Lytell gets back. I know what our conditions

are. You don't."

The stage rolled on into the darkness, but the five people standing beside the road did not move for a full minute.

Burrow was facing Carradine, his black eyes narrowed and ugly, one hand inside his coat. He let his hand fall.

"I think we'd better have an understanding, Carradine," he said flatly. "I'd rather kill you where you stand than let anything happen which would endanger our program. If this kicks back in our face, I will kill you."

But Carradine didn't back up. He was stubborn when he answered.

"Did it ever occur to you, Mr. Burrow, that us Oregonians think as much of our program as you Missourians do of yours?"

"Take it easy, Jeff," Wade said. "You ain't no general."

Without another word, Burrow wheeled and strode into the house.

"Get inside," Carradine nodded at Farnum.

When Farnum and Lois came in, Burrow was leaning against the fireplace, his eyes coldly speculative.

"As long as these two are alive, we're in danger," he said. "The woman was talking about seeing Reed tonight."

"They'll get a trial," Carradine said.

"When will Lytell get back?"

"Maybe an hour or more. The boys are drilling tonight."

"How many men?"

"Two hundred."

"Muskets?"

"About half enough. When we take Fort Vancouver, we'll have plenty."

Burrow jerked a thumb at Lois. "Lock her up. Or shoot her."

"There'll be no shooting until Lytell gets here," Carradine said sharply. "The Pacific Republic gives a fair trial to spies."

"Spies?" The word came involuntarily from Farnum. "Look. I'm a deserter. All I wanted was to get back home. I didn't see anything worth fighting for back there. I didn't know she was a spy."

"So you didn't know your wife was a spy?" Burrow asked meaningly.

"No."

"Why do you think she came to Oregon? Why do you think she wanted to see Adjutant-General Reed?" Burrow gave Farnum a straight look. "Maybe you're a fool, my friend. Pretty women like Lois Stone have a way of winding a man around their fingers."

"Maybe I did some winding." A mask of shrewd cunning came across Farnum's wide face. "How much money has this Pacific Republic got?"

"Why?"

Farnum jerked his head at Carradine. "How much?"

"Enough to pay for what we have to have."

THERE was silence then, spilling out one slow minute after the other, the three of them watching him—Wade blankfaced and puzzled, Burrow faintly amused and sardonic, Carradine suspicious, his fierce mustache giving his small pink face a piratical expression.

"Well, what am I offered for what I know?" Farnum demanded.

"You don't know anything," Burrow said contemptuously. "I've seen plenty of rats jump off sinking ships, but I never saw one who tried to get paid for it."

"I brought her out to Oregon." Farnum pointed toward Lois. He couldn't make himself look at her. If she hadn't hated him before, she would now. "I've got something to sell."

"We'll talk when Lytell gets here." Carradine picked up a lamp. "Upstairs."

Still Farnum didn't look at Lois as they walked up the stairs ahead of Jeff Carradine. Carradine opened a door and waved them through.

"Maybe you could make a jump from here, but you're a fool if you try it," he said. "There's a man down there who's got orders to shoot if you do."

Carradine set the lamp on the bureau and stepped back to the door. He stood studying Lois a moment, green eyes mirroring a growing uncertainty.

"I hate to see a pretty woman die when she's as young as you are." He spoke hesitantly. "Maybe I can help you."

"I have nothing to trade for my life," Lois said bitterly. "I missed my chance."

"We're playing a rough game," Carradine said. "The stakes are a country bigger than most kings rule over. One life more or less won't make much difference. That's the way Lytell's going to see it."

Lois walked to the window and stood staring into the darkness. Carradine shifted uneasily, glanced at Farnum as if there was something he wanted to say. Then, thinking better of it, he went into the hall and locked the door.

Farnum waited until Carradine's steps had died. Then he crossed the room, and putting a shoulder to the door, found it rock-solid. He came back beside Lois and leaned out of the window. The night had cooled, and it was entirely black. The stars were blotted out by eastward drifting clouds. He saw the faint glow of a cigar at the front corner of the house.

Farnum stepped back and sat down on the bed. Sifting tobacco into pipe, he took his first good look at Lois since they'd come into the room. She was standing with her back to the wall, tight-lipped and grim and with more scorn on her face than he had ever seen her show.

"You're wrong in what you're thinking," Farnum said brusquely. "I wouldn't sell my soul for a nickel."

She kept her silence, turning again to the window so that he could see only the rigid lines of her back. "You can think what you please, Lois, but we're into this together," he told her.

She whirled, the quick lash of anger whipping a bright red into her cheeks. "You heard what Burrow said about anybody with the name of Stone."

"You came to Oregon for a purpose. Have you done it?"

"I'd have finished my job on the stage if it hadn't been for you."

He held his cold pipe in his hand, trying to make out what she meant. Then he remembered that she had held a gun on Burrow. He stuffed his pipe into his pocket and crossed the room to her. Gripping her arms, he turned her to face him.

"I've got a job, also," he said. "I've got to live long enough to do it."

"A job of selling out your country," she cried. "Benedict Arnold had a job, too."

There was a gray, stricken look on his lean face then. That first day he had seen her he'd told himself he had to make her hate him. He'd succeeded better than he'd thought he could. He'd cut apart whatever slim bonds the months together had built between them.

Slowly Farnum went back to the bed and lighted his pipe and tried to think, but he found no satisfaction in either the smoking or the thinking. He knew Sam Lytell well enough to be sure of what lay ahead for him. Lois's death was destined as certainly as his. It was that thought which sent the prickle along his spine, that squeezed his stomach and tied it into knots. He was a spectator, watching a pattern form through the night hours which would take both his and Lois's lives.

Outside horses came along the road. Farnum crossed the room and stood at the window. He heard the sound of shifting leather as men dismounted, heard them come along the path, and the guard's greeting.

"Evenin', Mr. Lytell."

"Evening, Varney," Lytell boomed and passed into the house.

From what Carradine and Burrow had disclosed, the explosion was due. A matter of days, or hours, and the despair of failure was in Bill Farnum. He turned to Lois, wanting to tell her who he was and why he was here, and then could not. It was better that she didn't know.

THE key turned in the lock and the door was shoved open. Carradine came in, his long-barreled gun covering Farnum. "Come along, mister," he said. "You'll get your hearing later, ma'am."

Farnum walked out into the hall. "I wouldn't give a whoop for your chances, mister, the way things stand," Carradine said, as he locked the door. "Maybe you'd like to talk before we go down."

"I'll talk to the big ones," Farnum said quickly. "Not the small fry."

There were a dozen men in the room

when Farnum came down the stairs. He heard glasses clink, heard Lytell say:

"Here's to Colonel Burrow, recently of the Confederate army. May he be as successful in his leadership in Oregon as he was at Fredericksburg."

"And to Sam Lytell," a man answered. "The first governor of Oregon when our state lifts the standard of the Pacific Republic."

There was a pause then, and Farnum, watching from the doorway, saw Plez Burrow standing very straight beside Lytell's desk, a glass in his hand, his black eyes on fire with the emotion of the moment.

"Gentlemen, you have not seen war out here," Burrow said passionately. "You have not been pillaged and victimized by enemy soldiers. To all intents and purposes, you have been an independent nation. That is what I propose to help make you. Tomorrow night we attack Fort Vancouver. The news of that attack will start a blaze in California and the Pacific Republic will be a reality. Gentlemen, to the day when there shall be three independent Anglo-Saxon nations on this continent!"

"Free and able to govern ourselves without bowing to a bureaucracy three thousand miles away in Washington," Lytell cried fiercely.

Farnum stood there for long, taking it all in and wondering if these men were not mad. No, madness would have meant that they were pursuing some fantastic dream, but these men had greedy faces that told another story. They were gambling for big odds, gambling desperately.

CHAPTER III

Escape

ENTHUSIASTICALLY they drank. Then Burrow set his empty glass upon the desk, jerked a hand at Carradine.

"I want to make one thing clear at this time, Governor. I came here at risk of my life for two purposes. First, to give you the benefit of my military experience. Second, to act as a connecting link between your organization and similar organizations in the Middle West, such as the Order of the American Knights. You realize that the military situation is now at a place where success will depend on united action."

"We understand," Lytell said. Yet it was plain from his tone and expression that he was puzzled.

"Then, to prevent risking the chances of successful completion of my mission, I must insist that my orders be obeyed," Burrow snapped. "Before you arrived, Governor, Carradine demanded that his orders be carried out when his judgment was contrary to mine. Rather than use force at that time, I bowed to his will. I shall not do so again. I want your assurance that such a situation will not rise at another hour."

"He wanted the stage driver to tell folks in Salem he didn't have no passengers," Carradine said angrily. "I said to say they stayed here, Sam. Now who's right. You tell him."

"We have been telling the truth in such matters, Colonel Burrow," Lytell said uneasily. "I am too well known in the Willamette valley to be able to afford any unsavory entanglements, and it would be easy enough for the authorities to discover how many passengers the stage started with. The driver is our man. He will not make any statements concerning the number of passengers unless pressed."

"It's a matter of principle," Burrow said doggedly. "If I'm to be responsible for our military ventures, then you'll have to bow to my judgment in matters which protect those ventures."

"Colonel Burrow don't make mistakes," Wade said. "If it hadn't been for him, we wouldn't have picked up the Stone woman or him."

He jabbed a thumb in the direction of Farnum.

For the first time Lytell became aware

of Farnum. "How are you, Farnum?" he said. "Haven't seen you since you went East."

"I'm fine just now," Farnum said with grim humor. "How do you think I'll be by morning?"

"Dead." Lytell stepped behind his desk and sat down. "Hereafter, Colonel Burrow's orders are to be obeyed implicitly except in matters of taking human life. In such cases the accused will always have the right of a trial by jury." He motioned to the men grouped across the room. "You will act as jurymen. Colonel Burrow will officiate as prosecutor. Carradine will act for the defense."

Farnum's eyes searched the room. He saw no hope. Carradine was the one man who might give him a chance for life. Burrow was a fanatic reaching for personal power. Wade was his slave. Lytell and the others were politicians, Farnum judged, who had been office-holders before the Lincoln administration came into power.

With two lean years behind them, these men had become a group of self-seeking thieves and traitors instead of custodians of government property. Within hours of the moment to strike, they, like Burrow, would insist that nothing be allowed to endanger the success of their venture.

"You are charged with consorting with a spy, Farnum," Lytell said.

"Have you proved she's a spy?" Farnum demanded.

"We will." Lytell motioned toward Burrow. "Any questions?"

"I have some statements to make to the court," Burrow said, "which bear upon this case and which should be kept in mind when Lois Stone is brought in. Some time ago in performance of my duty I was obliged to kill Bob Stone, the girl's brother. We were both spies in Missouri.

"This Bob Stone was a Union agent seeking information about our organization. Shortly after I arrived in Oregon, one of our agents sent me word that Lois had started West. She had learned what my assignment was. She's the kind of a woman who would kill a man to avenge her brother and do it in the spirit of patriotism."

BURROW threw out a hand in a wide gesture.

"There is an undercover war in much of the border country. You will have it here the instant our flag is raised over Fort Vancouver. Get used to the idea of brother fighting brother and of being eternally spied upon. Get used to the idea of killing women. However much you may respect Lois Stone, you must condemn her to death." He motioned toward Farnum. "In view of his connection with Lois Stone, I demand the death penalty."

"The defense, Jeff." Lytell nodded at Carradine.

"You haven't proved—" Carradine began.

A man flung the door open.

"Men on horses coming!" he cried. "Sounds like a half dozen. Heading this way from Salem and they're sure digging holes in the gravel."

"A raid from the Adjutant-General's office," a man yelled, and bolted toward the door.

Lytell was on his feet, pudgy hand raised. "Just a minute, gentlemen! At this moment they have nothing to hang us for. After tomororw night we'll do the hanging."

"You're forgetting one thing." Burrow's voice was ugly. "Farnum has heard enough to hang us all." He drew his gun. "I'll carry out the order of the court now."

"Don't shoot him, Burrow," Carradine screamed, his gun covering the officer. "The court hasn't made no order. There's a few things I believe in enough to kill a man for if I've got to. Having a fair trial is one of 'em."

The thunder of hoofs was plain now. Lytell wheeled to face Burrow. "Jeff's right. Besides, a dead man in my house would be hard to explain. Wade, go upstairs to the girl's rom. Shoot her the instant you hear gunfire down here. Tell her that if she is discovered and talks, Farnum will be immdiately killed. The

rest of you sit down. Smoke. Talk. Act as if we were merely visiting. Burrow, take the chair behind Farnum. If he gives anything away, shoot him."

Farnum sat down in the chair Lytell pushed at him. Burrow swung behind him and sat down, his folded arms hiding a gun. "I'm a fair shot at this distance," he murmured.

"You'd kick this wide open if you killed me in front of these men," Farnum said.

"But you wouldn't be able to talk," Burrow pointed out. "And neither would your wife. You're the only Unionists in Oregon who know who I am. That's why you've received my personal attention."

"How did you happen to get on the stage with us?"

"I didn't just happen, my friend." Burrow laughed shortly. "As soon as I heard Lois was coming to Oregon, I gave her description to our men in Portland and Oregon City. She was spotted when your train first pulled in.

"I had Wade watch every move she made from then on. When you sold your outfit and took the stage to Salem, I knew it was time to stop you. Wade sent a messenger on ahead to Oregon City to inform me you'd boarded the stage, and I got word to Lytell's place to help us take you off."

Farnum sensed the great pride, the stubborn egotism of this man, and that therein lay his weakness. He sensed, too, the sharp antagonism between Carradine and Burrow. If given time, he could drive a wedge between them. But there was no time.

They came in, eight of them, all armed, brittle-tempered men who showed by their tense actions that they expected trouble. Farnum couldn't guess why they were here, but he cursed their stupidity for not coming in force. Eight wasn't enough to do this job.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Lytell said pompously. "Glad you dropped in, although I am somewhat at a loss to understand why you are visiting me at this hour. It's been some time since you were in my house, Adams."

THE long-necked man Lytell called Adams dropped a hand to gun butt. "We ain't makin' this visit 'cause we love you, Sam," he said bluntly, eyes stabbing the dark corners of the room. "We got word your boys took a couple of passengers off the stage tonight. We want 'em."

Lytell seemed surprised. "I hadn't heard anything about it. We have two guests here. If they want to go with you, they're welcome to do so. If they prefer to stay, I assure you they will. I shall not permit a group of armed men to enter my place and take my guests away by force."

"No use beatin' around the bush," Adams growled. "We've been watchin' your bunch, and we know danged well you're watchin' the Union Clubs. One of these days you'll step out of line. When you do, I'll put a hole in your skull."

"Maybe you'd like to do it now," Lytell challenged.

Adams glanced at Lytell's men scattered around the rom and shook his head. "Not tonight, Sam, but I aim to see those folks who got jerked off the stage."

It was a long chance for Bill Farnum to play, but it was the only chance he had, and he played it the only way he could. Once away from here with Lois, he could see Adjutant-General Reed; and the General, with the information Farnum and Lois had to give him, could crush the conspiracy.

"You can have a look at half of the folks," Farnum said easily, and got to his feet. "My wife and I stopped here because it had been a long trip from Portland and she was tired. We're going to Jacksonville in a day or two. Meanwhile, if you'll excuse me, I'll join my wife upstairs."

At Farnum's words Lytell's eyes widened in surprise. Burrow made no move to stop Farnum. As Farnum passed Carradine, he thought he saw a trace of admiration in the man's eyes. Then Farnum had climbed the stairs and was moving along the hall, exultation washing through him in a quick wild stream.

It had worked. The Secesh crowd didn't want trouble with their plans so near fruition.

Farnum opened the door of the room where he and Lois had been held prisoner and slid in. Lois was sitting beside the window.

Wade was on the bed. He came upright, gun swinging toward Farnum.

"What the devil are you doing up here?" Wade demanded.

"You ready to leave, honey?" Farnum asked, ignoring Wade's words.

"Leave?" Lois put questioning eyes on Farnum. "Are they going to let us?"

Farnum had closed the door and moved in front of Wade. "They aren't in position to stop us. A bunch of the Adjutant-General's boys are downstairs and they're suspicious about what's going on. The Secesh crowd is planning their big play tomorrow night, so they don't want anything to happen that will start the government to watching them too closely." He grinned at Wade. "That's why he can't shoot us now. He'd have the whole outfit up the stairs in two jumps."

Farnum had been talking to Lois, but he'd been covertly studying Wade. The big man, puzzled, had involuntarily turned to the door, his gun moving with the twist of his body, uncertainty taking hold of him. Farnum charged suddenly, head lowered into Wade's middle, smashing the big man flat across the bed. He heard the gusty out-sigh of breath. Then he dived after Wade, coming down hard upon him, fists driving at his jaw, cruel blows that snapped Wade's face one side and then the other.

Wade's gun had dropped to the bed when he'd first gone over. He tried to get it, but Lois had snatched it from his fingers. Farnum rose, and Wade, relieved of Farnum's weight, brought himself to a standing position, fists pawing blindly at Farnum's face. Farnum took the gun from Lois and slammed the barrel down across the big man's head in a vicious, downsweeping blow that smashed out the last of his vague consciousness. He toppled over with a sigh.

FARNUM slipped the gun into his waistband and turned to Lois. "Get it out of your head that I'm a Benedict Arnold. We've both got jobs to do. Are we working together?"

"Yes." She said it quickly, her face no longer grim and tight-lipped as it had been. "All the way to Adjutant-General Reed's office."

"And maybe the rest of our lives." Farnum didn't wait for her answer to that. He rolled Wade off the bed and pulled the blankets from it. "Not enough to get to the ground. I've got to use one to tie and gag Wade."

As Farnum was knotting the blankets together, Lois spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

"My petticoat will help," she said. "You can't afford to get a broken arm or leg now."

It was enough. Farnum tied an end of the improvised rope to the bedstead and tossed the other end through the window. He glanced down, and listened. He heard nothing but the pawing of horses in front of the house, the run of talk from the front room.

"Can you make it down there?" he asked.

"Of course."

"The guard's probably still inside the house. We take two of those horses and head for Salem."

Lois went down hand over hand. Farnum waited until he felt the tension of the rope slacken. Then he followed. He stood there for a moment, ears keening the air, eyes searching the blackness for motion.

Lamplight fell across the yard in front of the house.

They had to skirt that. It would be easy enough. The horses might offer more difficulties.

A voice spoke to Farnum from the shadows.

"All right, mister," the guard, Varney, said. "Just stand where you are. You're staying right here till Adams' outfit leaves. Then both of you will be going back inside."

CHAPTER IV

The Distant Guns

SICKENINGLY the wild flurry of hope that had been high in Bill Farnum from the moment he left Lytell's living room died in him. He had made one fatal mistake. He had thought Varney would remain in the house to side Lytell and the others if a showdown came.

Lois clutched Farnum's arm. He felt her body stiffen, knew that hope had died in her, too.

"Adams and his boys know me," Varney said coldly. "I'm always around here and I'm always armed. Lytell keeps some valuable property in the barn, and it's my job to guard it. Now if you make a run, and I shoot you, I'll say I caught a couple of sneak thieves. They'll believe me all right."

Again there was the slow drag of time. Farnum put an arm around Lois, and he knew she was crying. Her head was on his shoulder and he felt her body shake. The months of keying herself up for this night, and then facing failure, had been too much.

From where he stood, Farnum could not see around the corner of the house, but he heard men leaving now and a moment later heard them mount and ride south.

"All right," Varney said. "Back inside."

Lytell showed his surprise when Varney brought Farnum and Lois into the big room. "Caught 'em coming down a rope from the window," Varney explained. "They'd tied a bunch of blankets and her petticoat together. Reckon they'd been headed for Salem in about two jerks if I hadn't been there."

"Do you know what it would have meant if they'd got away?" Burrow demanded angrily.

"I know." Lytell faced his men. "What's the verdict?"

"You can't do nothing but shoot 'em," a man said, and the others nodded.

"You didn't give me any time for my defense," Carradine said hotly.

"It's war," Burrow snapped.

"War or not, a man's got the right to defend himself."

"Shut up, Jeff." The tension of this last hour showed on Lytell's florid face. "We're all getting edgy because we're close to the moment we've been planning for. You boys go home and sleep. You know your jobs."

"What about these spies?" a man asked.

"I'll do the chore," Burrow answered.

"Jeff will take care of the bodies," Lytell added. "A heavy rock tied to their feet will keep them at the bottom of the Willamette river."

"What kind of a country are you going to have," Carradine asked darkly, "if you build it on this kind of justice?"

Lytell held his tongue until the others had gone. Burrow stood beside him at the desk, Varney at the door. Carradine prowled the room, his hands clenching and opening in nervous excitement. Farnum, watching him and reading the bitterness that was in him, felt again the faint stir of hope. Carradine had one gun in his holster, another in his waistband. Farnum knew that time had run out, that his only chance lay in getting his hands on Carradine's extra gun.

"All right, Jeff." Lytell rubbed the palm of a hand across his face. "I've heard a lot of preaching out of you since we started on this. Fine sounding phrases like the rights of man which our forefathers died for. I'm sick of it. So blasted sick that if I hear another word, I'll send you over the same road the Farnums are taking."

"You're headed that way whether you say another word or not, Carradine," Farnum cut in. "You're the only one in the wolf pack who believes in what he's doing. You don't fit into the bunch, so they'll kill you."

Carradine was standing two paces from Farnum, feet apart, head thrust back, green eyes fixed on Lytell.

"Why do you say they'll kill me, Farnum?" he asked.

"We've had enough talk," Burrow said. "Lytell, I've had some things to say about your discipline. Carradine's an example of what I mean." He nodded at Farnum. "Turn around and walk out. Miss Stone, do you want a handkerchief over your eyes?"

FARNUM didn't move. "Lytell, how did Adams find out we were here?" he asked.

"The stage driver told him."

"You said he was one of your men."

"No more talk," Burrow snarled. "Walk out, Farnum, or I'll kill you here."

"Just a minute, Colonel." Lytell rose and poured himself a drink, some of the liquor spilling to the desk top. "Before Farnum dies, I think he should have a chance to tell us what he knows. I'd be willing to give him a reprieve if he has anything worth while to tell."

"No," Burrow snapped.

Lytell assumed an air of dignity. "You were speaking of discipline. You might remember that I am your superior, Colonel." He nodded at Carradine. "Jeff, forget what I said a moment ago. Take care of the stage driver tomorrow. Now Farnum, you're facing death. I'm making you an offer. Tell us all you know about this woman and your own reason for coming back to Oregon."

"You're no fool, Carradine," Farnum said, ignoring Lytell's words. "You've got Burrow pegged as well as I have. He doesn't give a hoot about your Pacific Republic. All he wants you to do is to pull his defeated Confederacy back on its feet. You're a dead man, Carradine. If you win, you'll still lose because Burrow doesn't believe in what you do."

"I'm thinking the same, Sam," Carradine cried. "I'm blasted if I'll let it happen. I've seen this coast suffer because we're three thousand miles from Washington. So have you, Sam. I'm blasted, I tell you, if I'll let a stranger like Burrow smash what we've tried to do. The only chance we've got for a decent government is the Pacific Republic, and then you let Burrow come out here and start running the whole shebang."

Farnum waited for it to break, tense, ready to grab the gun in Carradine's waistband, but the little man was still two yards away.

"You don't understand, Jeff," Burrow said smoothly. "Naturally my loyalty is with the Confederacy, but our interests are the same. Our victory makes yours possible, and the other way around. Now, Governor, I'd like to get this business over with."

It was back where it had started, and Farnum had gained nothing. His one hope lay in pitting Carradine against the others. He had almost succeeded, but almost wasn't good enough. He glanced at Lois. There was no despair in her now. She was smiling a little as she moved toward the door.

"I'm ready, Burrow," Lois said. "Killing is your business, only we might as well be frank and call it murder. You remember you shot my brother in the back."

"You're lying," Burrow said hotly.

Lois acted as if she hadn't heard. "The only person in this room I feel sorry for is Carradine."

"Why?" Lytell asked curiously.

"Because as long as he lives he'll never forget the part he played in our murder."

Lois had moved over beside Varney. Farnum, seeing what she had in mind, took two quick steps toward Carradine.

"Only you won't live long enough to worry about it, Carradine. Lois and I have been in Missouri. We know what Plez Burrow is."

Farnum jerked the gun from Carradine's waistband just as Carradine pulled his other revolver from holster.

"Don't be a fool, Jeff!" Lytell yelled.

But it had gone too far for Lytell to stop. Burrow's gun was in his hand and was thundering before Carradine's weapon was level. The little man lurched with the impact of that shot, but he kept his feet. Then Farnum's gun roared, its smoke and flame and sound adding to the

inferno in the room.

Lytell had jerked a gun from a desk drawer and was raising it when Farnum's bullet cut him down. He fell forward across the desk, his gross, shapeless body hanging there a moment before it slid on to the floor.

Farnum whirled, knowing that Varney was behind him. He saw, in the short interval of time it took him to turn, that Burrow was backed against the wall, a hand clutching his shirtfront, the other struggling with the weight of his pistol.

JAW set, Farnum was facing Varney then, with all his suppressed fury raging through him. Lois had leaped at the guard, had kept him for a short interval of time from pouring his fire into Farnum's back. Now, just as Farnum wheeled, Varney struck Lois in the face, knocking her away from him. Farnum fired twice, the reports rolling together so that they sounded like one continuous blast of thunder. Varney took two lurching steps before he fell and lay still.

Farnum whipped his gun back to cover Burrow, but Burrow was on the floor, life gone from him, arms stretched full length, fingers clawlike as they had dug into the boards in the final agony of death.

Carradine was down, but he wasn't dead. "Farnum!" he called.

Farnum helped Lois to her feet and wiped the blood from her cheek where Varney's fist had struck her. He came to Carradine then and knelt beside him.

"Here, Carradine," he said.

"I pegged you for a spy sent back home to see what we were doing. That right?"

"That's it. The War Department knew something of your plans. I was to pose as a deserter, talk big against the war and get in bad with the government. I had some information that would have convinced Lytell, but I never had a chance to use it. Burrow put a stop to everything."

Carradine's eyes closed. "Burrow put a stop to a lot of things. We'd have been better off to have managed our own war." His eyes came open then, and in one last burst of frenzy, he said, "You didn't learn nothing that will hurt us, Farnum. You stopped the attack on Fort Vancouver, but there are better men than Lytell who'll take his place."

Again Carradine's eyes closed as if he was utterly weary. He lay quietly for a time, barely breathing.

"Funny thing, me killing Plez Burrow," he murmured. "The way I've got God figgered, He's going to be easy on men who died for what they believed in, and mighty hard on the buzzards who aimed to pick the bones of decent men."

Carradine died then, there on the floor in front of Sam Lytell. Farnum rose, and pulled Lois out of the room that was strong with the stench of powder-smoke and death and evil. He filled his lungs with fresh air and let it out in a long gusty breath.

"Did you come to Oregon to kill Plez Burrow?" he asked.

SHE NODDED. "I was given the job of our organization at home, but I'm glad Carradine did it instead of me." She paused then, her eyes searching his. "The battle guns are a long ways from here, Bill. Are you going back?"

"My job isn't done in Oregon." He stared down at her face, a pale oval in the darkness. She'd hated him once tonight. "Lytell's horse is in front. Maybe he'll carry double." He cleared his throat. "I'm a fool for telling you, but I love you. A man doing my work can't have a woman loving him. I reckon you don't think much of me, but—" He floundered off into silence.

"Oh, Bill, we've been such fools or we'd have told each other a long time ago."

He kissed her then, and for that moment the tense memories of the past hours were blotted out.

●

Top-Flight Western Novels by Max Brand, W. C. Tuttle and Leslie Ernenwein in the August issue of Triple Western—25c at all stands!

"Reach! If you peep I'll sieve you!"

Tagged as a killer, the Roamin' Kid has neither friend nor alibi when he's a—

STRANGER IN TOWN

By TOM CURRY

ALL THROUGH the long evening this other matter had kept coming up and had impressed the Roamin' Kid even as he concentrated on the game. The struggle at the green-baize table had begun early in the Rack & Ruin and now, in the small hours, the climax had come.

The Roamin' Kid felt an inner thrill as he contemplated his adversary, a chunky, black-clad man with an utterly expres-

sionless face, the finest gambler in the settlement—let's see, what was its name? —Wartville! It had narrowed down to a contest between the Roamin' Kid and the pro; both had pushed everything visible into the pot while the others had dropped out.

Ban Barker, known as the Roamin' Kid throughout the Southwest, was also a professional gambler but an itinerant one. Restless, always hunting new fields to conquer, he kept his bronc's legs moving between oases. He seldom stayed put for long, just to rest Whitey, his fine gelding, and win or lose at the tables.

He was as slight of build as a slender boy; he had a good jaw, the bronzed sweep unyielding. His hair and eyes were dark, his rare smile self-deprecative, his remarks few and far between and always to the point. Home was where he chanced to lay his head on his saddle. He wore range garb, leather pants tucked into half boots with big silver spurs, a blue shirt, a large Stetson.

In the stud game, four cards showed face up. The Wartville pro had two aces in sight while the Roamin' Kid had two jacks. The hole card was turned down and if the pro had a third ace in the hole the Roamin' Kid couldn't win.

He hesitated a moment. Cached under his shirt was a hundred-dollar bill, a last resort stake so he could gain a fresh start in life in case he was cleaned out. He hated to touch that but now his slim hand moved to it and he nodded. "Raise you a hundred, mister."

A snatch of talk, the voice thick from the effects of liquor, reached Ban Barker from the bar: "A doggone shame . . . Poor Susie, blind and all. Nobody but the lowest form of polecat would do that." "You're right, Lon. Who'd shoot poor old Bob Howell? Nicest hombre in Wartville . . . What's Susie to do now, with nobody to look after her?"

There it was again, and Barker had caught such snatches all evening. "Poor Susie." "Poor old Bob, best-hearted cuss in Arizona . . ." Whenever a new customer came in, a cowboy or rancher from far-flung ranges, he was besieged by men wishing to be first with the startling information: "Hear about old Bob Howell? Shot and killed by holdups. Robbed!"

"Yeah, I heard. Shame, ain't it? Ought to string up whoever did it, that's what I say."

"Stringin's too good for 'em, save that for the end. Ought to get the lash, says I, then Judge Lynch . . ."

The Roamin' Kid, a somewhat dusty, down-to-earth Sir Galahad by nature, felt irritated. He had never seen Wartville or heard its name before and knew none of its inhabitants. The bits of talk had aroused his curiosity despite his concentration on the duel with the black-clad pro, who was an excellent player. On several pots he had neatly bluffed the Kid, no mean feat. Now Barker wasn't sure whether there was an ace in the hole or not. He needed that stake for a new start. His hand stopped and he thought he'd change his mind and fold. He'd been cleaned out before except for the hundred. Some days a man couldn't win.

Then he brought out the bill and dropped it in the pot.

FOR A moment the Roamin' Kid believed he had lost. The corners of the pro's mouth turned up, the man almost smiled and it was his first show of emotion. He glanced up, the narrowed, pale-blue eyes fixing on Barker's lean face.

"You win, I fold." He turned up his hole card, a trey, not an ace, and the Roamin' Kid turned his. It was a six. The pro had had him beaten but Barker had convinced his opponent he had a third jack hidden.

"Nice work," nodded the pro. "You play a real game."

It had been fair and square and the loser was a good one. "You're no slouch yourself, mister. Will you drink?" asked Barker.

"Don't care if I do."

Barker pocketed his winnings, almost two thousand dollars, and the gamblers went to the bar across the saloon. Damp sawdust, redolent with spilled liquor,

crunched under their boots. In a rear corner were tables where jaded men and women sat, while the fiddler and piano killer made hideous attempts to produce jiggy music. Smoke from Indian cheroots and quirlies hung thick around the gilt oil lamps hanging from low rafters. A bartender in a stained apron brought them a bottle of redeye and glasses. The Roamin' Kid and his guest drank.

Nearby, a middle-aged townie in shapeless pants and an old gray shirt began to sob. He was holding himself up by the edge of the counter. "Poor Susie . . . I can't stand it. All alone in a cruel world. Blind too . . ."

The Roamin' Kid glanced at the maudlin townie, before asking the pro, "Can you eat the chow here, mister?"

"Yeah, it ain't bad. Some run, that last one, wasn't it?"

"Sure was. I nearly dropped out."

The pro nodded. "You're a stranger in town. We don't see many, we're off the beaten track. I don't often get a good game. I savvy the play of all the cusses for two hundred miles around and it's sort of tame, taking away their hard-earned money."

"Poor Susie! Poor old Bob. . . ." The drunk was crying his heart out. "By jupe, I'm going out and trail those sidewinders myself and get back all that cash for her!" He tried to draw his pistol but the effort proved too much and he collapsed in a sordid heap on the rail.

"What's all that about?" asked Barker. "Poor Susie?"

"A holdup, late last night. Bob Howell was the storekeeper, an old timer. Susie's his granddaughter, eighteen or so, lived with him. Howell fetched her up; the girl's stone-blind, lost her folks when she was five in a smallpox epidemic. Howell was good stuff. He'd grubstake any man and he had a lot cached in his store. He was old-fashioned and wouldn't put it in the bank over at Rawhide. Anyway, he was shot down and the robbers run off with his box. Susie heard the scuffle, her grandpap's yells and the shot, but couldn't see 'em."

"Why don't they get on the trail instead of crying about it?"

"No sign left. Marshal Abe Schlotz was over at Rawhide to deliver a prisoner and didn't get back till this morning. We don't have much trouble here, they'll never solve it. Schlotz is old and ready to retire and his deputy, Chuckhead Olsen, is the stupidest fool in the county—there's Olsen, over by the front door."

Ban Barker looked. A heavy man with an over-large, dull face shadowed by black beard stubble, slouched against the siding. He wore a sweated, dirty brown shirt, a keystone deputy badge pinned to a pocket flap, stained black trousers tucked into runover, muddy boots and a flat-brimmed "Nebraska" Hat. A walnut-stocked Colt sagged at his burly hip. The pendulous lower lip was lax, hanging so the lower, tobacco-stained front teeth were visible. He sported a small mustache, and the Kid found the deputy's clouded eyes fixed on him. Barker was sensitive and thought the officer had been watching him but as their gazes tangled, Chuckhead Olsen swung and went out.

The Roamin' Kid forgot it. After another drink he invited the pro to supper. When they had finished, he rose.

"I'll be moseying. Gracias for a real good time, mister."

"Don't mention it. Be sure to drop in again if you come through this way."

The Roamin' Kid promised he would. He strolled out the batwings and stepped off the low porch, sparing an incurious glance at what there was of Wartville. A main road widened into a scrofulous plaza, in the far corner of which was an adobe brick building with bars in the window, obviously the marshal's office and lockup. Facing across the plaza were two lines of dispirited buildings, some with weather-warped false fronts.

The Rack & Ruin was the chief amusement center although there were three or four smaller saloons, with Howell's general store at the north end. A livery stable and corral by it, a hardware and feed store, served the community. Only the bars now had lamps burning while the

municipal lighting consisted of a few smoky oil lanterns strung on poles around the plaza.

The Roamin' Kid had left Whitey, his beautiful gelding with the pepper-and-salt tail, in the stable corral for a grain feed. He had paid in advance as required. His expensive saddle hung on the rail and taking it down, he clucked to Whitey, who came trotting to him to nuzzle his cheek. Barker spoke low praise that Whitey appreciated, and taking down the gate pole, led out his mount. It was his intention to ride out of town a mile or two, make camp in the brush and sleep through the next morning.

"Reach! If you peep I'll sieve you!"

The voice was icy. It came from black shadow to his rear and the Roamin' Kid's hands were full of saddle. Barker said nothing but let the heavy hull slide down his thigh to the tramped ground as he slowly raised his hands.

"Take his gun," ordered Shiver Voice.

THE Roamin' Kid was ready just in case. The order meant there were more than one in the party. He was vexed at his own carelessness in walking into the trap. A big winner was always fair game for holdups and as a rule he was more careful. But it had been an exciting game, the pro such a good fellow, Wartville so small and slow, that he had relaxed. And in the back of his mind it had kept ringing, "Poor Susie! Poor old Bob. . . . All alone now . . . Blind."

From his other side a stealthy figure sidled up. The Roamin' Kid noted the bandanna mask drawn to the eyes, glinting a bit. He expected to have his Colt removed, then his winnings.

A hand stole around to his slender hip and he felt the faint twitch as his gun was lifted from the oiled case. "I got it, Mike," announced the second man in a hoarse, triumphant whisper.

"Don't call my name, you fool! Pat him for a spare. His kind usually carries one."

Mentally the Roamin' Kid made ready. He did have a spare gun, in a shoulder holster under his left armpit. The searching hand reached its bulk. Now the hand's owner had to move around so his body was between Shiver Voice and the victim, as he reached in for the extra Colt. That was when the Roamin' Kid made his desperate play. He grabbed for the fellow's other wrist, got it, dropped and pulled hard—Barker knew all the tricks of catch-as-catch-can. A booted foot came up as he landed on his back, the foot driving into his adversary's middle, doubling the man up. The tables were turned. If Shiver Voice fired it would be into his pard.

As the Roamin' Kid shoved, the fellow twisted sideways and Barker's big spur points raked the falling man's back. "Yow-ee!" screeched the prodded holdup.

"Dry up!" That was Shiver Voice, no amateur. He didn't shoot but lunged in. He was most efficient and before the Roamin' Kid could untangle himself and rip around, Shiver Voice was upon him, aiming for his skull. The Colt barrel slashed Barker's head with professional skill and the Roamin' Kid lay quiet.

He came to in darkness. He opened his eyes but his presence of mind was such that he kept his lashes lowered and didn't budge. He could see nothing, the world seemed totally black. For a time he waited, listening, watching. Nothing. He heard no breathing, no soft sounds such as a nearby guard would make. His hat was missing and his head ached. He could feel the stiff dried blood in his hair. At last, when he looked straight up, he saw a bit of sky with several pinpoint stars blinking in it. He reached out an exploring hand. It was stopped by a dirt wall and a small slide of gravel ensued.

He sat up and checked himself for injuries. One leg was sore but he could use it. He rose, the exploring hand touching the almost perpendicular gravel wall in a rough circle, all the way around. He barked his shins on a large boulder close to the wall. It had been left in the shaft or dry well, whatever it was, probably because it was too heavy to hoist out.

He reeked of whiskey. His shirt felt damp as though the liquor had been poured over him.

He climbed to the top of the boulder and wasn't so far from the rim, but it was impossible to get out even when he tried jumping up. His clutching hands, clawing at the brink, broke it in, causing more slides.

He rested and checked up. His money was gone, of course, both his side and shoulder holsters were empty. A horse whinnied, startlingly close. He froze, thinking his enemies must be above him. Then he realized it was Whitey, his pet horse, calling him. Whitey could scent him and had heard him moving around.

"Whitey!" he said softly. "Come here, boy!"

Soon he heard hoofs crunching. Against the lighter sky patch he saw the big gelding's head, gingerly poked over the edge of the hole. Whitey was afraid to venture too close for fear he might slide in. But he had been left with his rein on the ground and the Roamin' Kid had an idea. It took a little time but Whitey was well-trained and obedient, and with the gelding's head lowered, Barker at last was able to jump from the boulder and catch the dropped leather strap as it slipped over the brink.

He clung there, digging his high heels into the sliding dirt side. "Back up," he ordered, and Whitey braced, drawing up his head. A moment later the Roamin' Kid flew up and sprawled free on the ground.

Stars powdered the dome of the universe while a gibbous moon lowered just above the horizon. A faint breeze rustled the dry growth as the Roamin' Kid picked himself up, swearing because he had been taken and robbed but relieved he was alive and only bruised. The obvious conclusion was that somebody had seen him winning at the Rack & Ruin and had waited for him outside.

He sought to orient himself. Against the paler sky, about thirty paces from the shaft, showed the dark bulk of a tumbledown shack, its windows gaping. The setup looked like the abandoned camp of a departed miner. He was up high, on a hill, for he could look over an expanse of rough country. Perhaps a mile or two from the site he saw blinking yellow lights. They must mark a town, perhaps Wartville.

The Roamin' Kid felt Whitey all over. Taking the rein, he led his horse around a few times to make sure the gelding had no injuries. Satisfied that Whitey was all right, he was about to swing into his saddle when from behind the cabin a hard voice commanded,

"Reach!"

"Hair in the butter!" gasped the Roamin' Kid. It just couldn't happen twice the same night!

BUT HE had no gun on. The shack corner was too close to hope that whoever it was might miss, and he stood in the moonlight, an easy target. Reluctantly, he raised his hands.

"Somebody beat you to it, mister," he growled.

"Now stand quiet," his hidden foe snapped. The voice was tough but it hadn't the icy quality of Shiver Voice's. "I'll let you have it if you wiggle. Go to it, Chuckhead, get around behind him, pronto."

"Chuckhead" appeared, rounding the other end of the shack. He made a wide circle and came up behind the Roamin' Kid. He poked at Barker in a perfunctory manner and then sang out, "He's clean, Marshal Schlotz."

Now the luckless Ban Barker knew who had arrested him. He recalled his gambler acquaintance's talk about the town marshal at Wartville, and Schlotz's chief deputy, Chuckhead Olsen. He felt relieved rather than otherwise for he had done nothing wrong and this was the law.

"Howdy, Marshal," he sang out. "Look here, I was robbed and buffaloed back at the Rack & Ruin—"

"Dry up!" Chuckhead Olsen clipped him alongside the head from behind, almost knocking him down since the blow was unexpected.

"You got the bull's-eye, ain't you?" called Schlotz. "Pull back the slide and train the beam on the cuss, Chuckhead my boy."

There was a low metallic click and a stabbing beam smote the Roamin' Kid's eyes. He blinked sourly. Chuckhead Olsen had him covered with a Colt, too. Now Marshal Abe Schlotz came out from cover and approached, a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun at the hip and ready.

"Loaded with buck, hombre," he warned. "I'll cut you into chunks if you don't behave."

"I'll behave, Marshal," promised the Roamin' Kid earnestly. "I'm mighty glad to see you. I tell you, I was held—"

"Shut up!" The powerful deputy clipped him again.

"Find anything on him?" inquired Schlotz, stopping at just the right distance so the prisoner couldn't lunge with any hope of success. Now the Roamin' Kid could make out the bony, bowed figure, the red-weathered, mustachioed face so wrinkled it seemed like parchment. Wartville's lawman was ancient, probably seventy-five or more, but still up to a local job.

"He ain't carrying anything," answered Chuckhead Olsen. "Should I search his saddlebags?"

"Go to it. I'll keep the scoundrel covered."

Whitey was near, and Olsen unstrapped the bags. Soon he uttered an exclamation and then brought to the bull's-eye a brown leather wallet to examine it more carefully.

"Look here, Marshal! There's some money here, but only part of it. Say, this has old Bob Howell's name writ on it in gold letters!"

Schlotz cursed, fuming in rage. "Yeah, I savvy. I saw old Bob with it more than once. We got our man, I reckon. See can you find the rest, Chuckhead. That poor little blind girl will need it."

The Roamin' Kid gulped as he swiftly appraised the situation. There was the old storekeeper who had been robbed and killed, the sightless granddaughter Susie—and they had just found Howell's wallet in his saddlebag!

"It's—it's a plant!" was all he could think of.

What few snags Schlotz had left in his mouth gleamed a brief moment. "Listen, boy. Every man I ever caught square has said that. I don't reckon, if you asked 'em, you'd ever find a guilty party. Let's look in the shack, Chuckhead. Might have cached it there." He shook the menacing shotgun at Barker. "March, you."

The bull's-eye lighted the single room of the cabin. The door hung on rotted, sagging leather hinges. The floor was of dirt. Cobwebs slowly waved in the eaves, disturbed by the passage of the intruders. There were a couple of moldy blankets in a corner, a few empty, rusting tin cans, a box or two. The lantern beam glinted on a whiskey bottle and Chuckhead Olsen picked it up.

"The danged fool!" exclaimed the deputy. "Why, Marshal, this cuss holed up here after the job and then came into town again. He won a big stake from Dave Forles. He came up here, drank himself into a stupor—smell him! He staggered out to get his horse and ride and must have slipped into that old shaft!"

"Chuckhead," remarked Schlotz admiringly, "you're getting smart! I didn't think you had it in you, son, but you really got a head on those shoulders."

"Thanks, Abe," simpered Olsen.

THE Roamin' Kid stared at the deputy whom he was beginning to dislike. Burly and dirty except for a new gray shirt, Chuckhead preened himself on his own acumen. The keystone deputy badge shone while Olsen could not help glancing at the marshal's star pinned to Schlotz's flapping vest.

"Yes sir," went on Schlotz. "I aim to go out to my ranch for good soon, Chuckhead, and I'll sure recommend you for my job." With frank approval, the marshal slapped Olsen on the back, a hearty, man-to-man blow.

"Ye-ow!" Chuckhead flexed and bit his lip. Then he coughed, pulling himself together. He slapped Ban Barker again and knocked the Roamin' Kid into a corner. "Where's the rest of the money from that store holdup, you skunk? You killed

old Bob Howell, and robbed a poor blind girl, that's the kind of Indian you are! I'd like to rip the hide off you with my bare hands!" Olsen was smarting and sounded most indignant.

"I don't savvy where the money is," drawled Barker. He spoke to the marshal, whose washed-out old eyes were stern and uncompromising. "Because I didn't do that job. I only pulled into town a few hours before I started that stud game."

"Alibi, huh? Where were you?" demanded Schlotz.

Come too think of it, the Roamin' Kid had been camped in the brush for twenty-four hours before he had visited Wartville. Whitey had needed a rest. Barker couldn't prove where he had been at the time of the Howell holdup.

For a while they questioned him, but then gave up. Olsen made a few ineffectual stabs at probing the loose dirt in the corners.

"Tell you what," said Schlotz. "We'll come here in daylight with a posse, Chuckhead, and fine-comb the place, the outside as well. Tie the little scoundrel's hands and we'll take him to the calaboose."

His captors riding behind, his wrists fastened with rawhide thongs, the Roamin' Kid was escorted down a steep trail to the flats. The distance to Wartville wasn't great. As they hit the north end of the plaza, passing Howell's general store, the first pale touch of dawn showed on the eastern horizon.

At the jail, they pulled up. "Get off," ordered Schlotz, and the Roamin' Kid obeyed. He strode into the office, the marshal and deputy after him. They freed his hands and Schlotz covered him with the scattergun while Chuckhead opened the padlock on the cell gate. The Roamin' Kid stepped in, the deputy giving him a shove. The gate clanged shut and Olsen snapped the lock.

There was a small barred window high in the wall, a board bench to be used as a seat and bed, a bucket, and except for a few spiders and ants, that was about all. The Roamin' Kid took hold of the bars and stared out.

"Would you mind telling me how you figured all this, Marshal?" he inquired, any delicate shading of sarcasm lost on the two officers who were congratulating themselves on a smart capture.

"You were the only stranger in town," answered Schlotz. "We got a tip a man looking like you was seen hurrying away from Howell's store right after the holdup. Chuckhead had a hunch you might have holed up in the old cabin, since you'd had the nerve to come back here after that job."

"Who gave you this tip?"

"Huh? Oh, it was just a note like we sometimes will get. Whoever left it for me didn't dare sign it, probably afeared of what you'd do to him if you broke loose."

"So I killed and robbed an old hombre named Howell, the storekeeper!"

"Sure, you know it danged well, we got you to rights," shouted Olsen. "His granddaughter's blind, she heard it but couldn't see you. Where's your pardner on the deal? Has he got the rest of the money or did you cache it? We're the law and we ain't so dumb, no sir. Picked you up pronto, and we got you dead to rights."

Barker had to agree to that last. The finding of Howell's wallet with a fraction of the stolen money in it, his inability to prove an alibi, the fact he was a stranger in town, made it look hopeless for him. Only the Kid and whoever had framed him knew the truth.

"He's safe here," said Schlotz. "Let's go for a drink, Chuckhead. You can keep an eye on him through the day."

When they had gone out, Barker sat on the hard board and thought. He could feel the tightening hemp noose around his throat. He had no friends, no connections and all his money had been taken from him.

Suddenly he hooked up Shiver Voice and the bandit's aide as they had to be hooked up to it all. He had been disturbed and somewhat dazed by the terrible accusation of having killed an old man and robbed him. He guessed that the holdup outside the Rack & Ruin had been in-

spired by more than the desire to take his winnings, substantial as they had been. "A thousand to one, Shiver Voice and his pal pulled that job! Then they used me to hide behind and settle it."

He asked himself why, staring at the adobe wall, his mind clicking fast. Must be some good reason why the real outlaws had gone to the trouble of planting the cruel deed on a stranger. Other things came to mind and it all began to add up. He swore, and his gaze, riveted to the wall, focused on a dark crack between bricks. It was in the far corner. He went to investigate. Local clap had been used as mortar to stick the bricks together; a leak in the roof had let moisture in, and the crude cement had begun to crumble. He bent down, unfastened a long spur, and went to work. He raked at the mortar with the steel—often these rustic jails were so weak, a detemined man could break out if he weren't continually watched.

The sun was coming up as Chuckhead returned and found the Roamin' Kid, who had heard his heavy steps, lying with closed eyes on the board. The deputy grunted in satisfaction, went to a chair and put his feet on the desk. Soon he was snoring, and the Roamin' Kid rose quietly and went to work on the bricks in the corner.

IN THE middle of the day it was stuffy in the jail. That afternoon Ban Barker heard many voices in the plaza. He pulled up so he could peek from the little window. A crowd had collected in the square nearby and men were haranguing the citizens. Cowboys, townies and others knotted together out there, and the Roamin' Kid, though he couldn't hear what was being said, knew a lynch mob when he saw one making up. Now and then an orator would point at the jail in front of which Chuckhead Olsen was ostentatiously patrolling.

"They'll be after me tonight," decided the Roamin' Kid. Such a mean job would infuriate every man in the community.

He returned with fresh energy to the task of loosening bricks.

After supper, Marshal Schlotz looked in. Dark had fallen but the moon wasn't up yet. The old officer glanced through the bars into the cell. On the office desk burned a small oil lamp, its rays feebly showing the prisoner lying on his board.

"Better keep quiet," warned the marshal. "I'm having a time with the boys. They want to string you up. I'll protect you. Chuckhead will stand guard here."

Olsen was on hand and remained behind as the marshal left the jail and went toward the Rack & Ruin. Chuckhead was restless. Soon he came to look at the captive.

"I ain't risking my hide for a no-good killer like you," he growled, and went outside.

Now was the Roamin' Kid's last chance. In an hour or so the "boys" would be full of burning liquor, whipped up, ready for the lynch party. Schlotz wouldn't be able to check it and obviously the deputy wouldn't bother to try.

The bricks were of good size, while the Roamin' Kid was slender. He worked furiously, prizing the first block out with the long spur shank till he could get hold with his fingers. It was a single wall and with one out, the next followed with comparative ease. Through the aperture came loud yells from the saloons as the boys hit it up.

Squeezing through the hole, he rolled on the warm, sandy dirt and came up in a crouch. The wall was shadowed and nobody had seen him. Olsen wasn't around the jail. The Roamin' Kid slid to the open door of the office. In one corner was a rack, a shotgun in a slot. He slipped in, took the gun, hunted for shells and found a box in a desk drawer.

Whitey had been unsaddled and led off. He might be forced to take a horse from the rail. He glided across the main stem, but ducked behind a watering trough on the plaza as he sighted Chuckhead. The deputy emerged from the Rack & Ruin, stood a brief moment, then swung off the low stoop. He went down the walk and turned into a side way.

Barker had figured out enough to work on. Smarting from the humiliation, he was determined to clear himself if possible. Escape could come later if need be. He hurried over and trailed Olsen. Pausing at the back corner of the dark building, he glimpsed the deputy moving around a stable. The Roamin' Kid tiptoed after him, again waited at the turn; this time he had missed Chuckhead, and feared he had lost him, but then he caught the faint closing of a door. It came from a toolshed behind that stable.

The Roamin' Kid slid up. Weathering had shrunk the boards, and he could hear low voices in there. A tiny yellow sliver showed as a candle was lighted inside.

"You're all set, Olsen. Here's your share. I keep the rest. Reckon' you're it, ain't you?"

Barker alerted. he was sure that was Shiver Voice!

"Yeah, Blackjack, I'll be next marshal of this town," said Chuckhead proudly. "It worked out fine. They'll string up that little customer tonight and settle it."

"Bueno. You did right to send for me. I'll be riding. When you're marshal you can tip me on more jobs."

"Sure, but we better lie quiet a while. I reckon I showed Wartville! Folks won't laugh at me no more." Chuckhead's overweening vanity was plain. Barker realized the deputy had done what he had done not only for the money but for the sake of ambition.

HE WAS just to one side as the door opened out. The shotgun was levelled on the startled Chuckhead. "Reach!" snapped Ban Barker. "Now it's my turn."

Olsen's face broke. His lips went lax, his chin dropped and he showed his cowardice.

"Don't shoot me!" he begged.

By the candlelight, the Roamin' Kid saw behind Olsen a tall, rawboned man with close-set black eyes, a black-furred Stetson pushed back on his head, a hard look to the bearded, bronzed face. Twin guns hung in oiled sheaths, and he went after one instantly, hoping to use the burly deputy as a shield.

The shotgun blasted a shade ahead of the revolver. Blackjack caught several slugs, was half knocked around, his gun arm dropping. A moment later he was writhing on the floor, while Chuckhead, his teeth chattering as he felt the close breath of death, dropped to his knees in terror.

It had been a trick to pick up Marshal Abe Schlotz and draw him off but Barker had managed it. He had had to cover the officer and march him to the rear street. Then he had made Schlotz come to the toolshed and with the guttering candle exposing them, there lay Blackjack and Olsen, trussed and gagged.

"Why, that long sidewinder is Blackjack Mike Lorber," cried the startled Schlotz. "One of the worst bandits in Arizona."

"I found the rest of the Howell money on 'em, Marshal," said the Roamin' Kid. "Here it is, for the little blind lady. That cussed deputy of yours wanted your star and he imported Blackjack to rob Howell. They killed the old man so he couldn't talk, then picked me, a stranger in town, and made that plant like I told you. They needed someone who wouldn't have any friends handy to alibi him. Dumped me in that shaft so Olsen could lead you to me and prove how smart he is!"

Schlotz was more than convinced. He scowled down at his deputy, then stooped and ripped off the keystone badge, taking a chunk of Olsen's new shirt with it.

"Don't savvy how you figured it, son," he said to the Roamin' Kid.

"When those two held me up, I roweled one across the back with a spur, ripping through his shirt to his hide. Chuckhead showed up in a clean shirt, and when you slapped him on the back he yelped so I figured he must be it. That set me on the right track."

Ban Barker pulled out the money he had won in the poker game. "Drop this in the kitty for the young lady, Marshal."

He was whistling a gay tune as he rode Whitey out of Wartville, headed for the wide-open spaces, fancy free.

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

The bluebird was considered sacred by Navajo Indians.

The pony express took 10½ days to carry mail from St. Joseph, Mo., to San Francisco, a distance now covered by the train in 43 hours.

The best preserved prehistoric cliff dwellings in the United States are in Mesa Verde.

Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, life-and-death enemies in the titanic Civil War struggle, once fought in the same war on the same side, the Black Hawk Indian War of 1832.

Holland, Mich., police recently were called to a theater at 4:30 a. m. to let a boy out after he'd been discovered inside. "What's the matter, was the Errol Flynn Western picture so dull you went to sleep?" he was asked. "Nope," he replied. "It was so good I decided to stay and see it again tomorrow."

Sierra Nevada in English means snowy range.

On location in Gallup, New Mexico, for his latest Western movie, Gregory Peck was besieged by 200 Navajo Indians working as extras in the film. They declared he was their favorite actor, explaining, "He looks like real Navajo chief." Peck, who doesn't have a drop of Indian blood in him, signed his autograph 200 times anyway.

Fort Peck Dam, Montana, is the world's largest earth-fill dam.

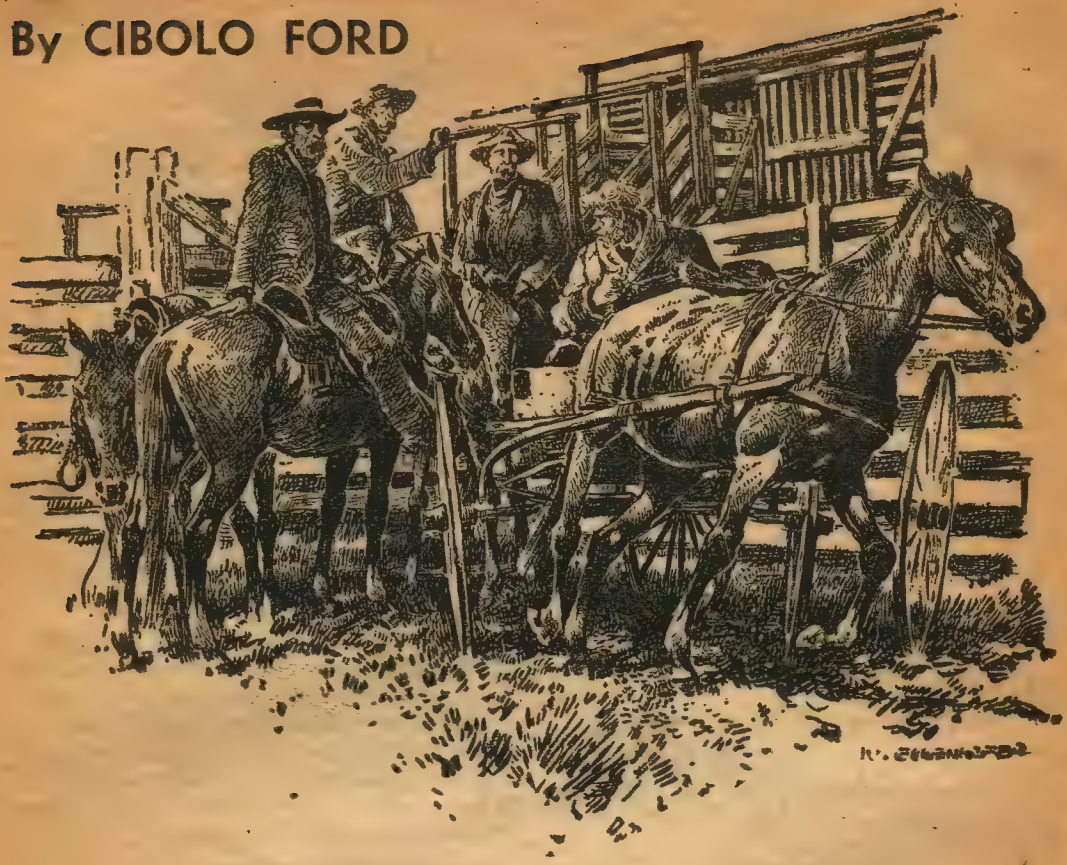
Although you might think otherwise, the Colorado River Basin is one of the most arid sections in the United States.

The present trend toward unification of our military forces is nothing new. As far back as 1837, during the Second Seminole Indian War, the Army, Navy and Marines engaged in a joint inland operation. This war is regarded as the longest and costliest of all Indian-white man conflicts.

The largest unfenced herds of buffalo are in the Houserock Valley, north of the Grand Canyon, in Arizona.

Men of the Incas Indian tribe were obliged to marry at the age of 24.

By CIBOLO FORD



Widelooper Luck

SIX-FEET-SIX of rawboned strength, puffing clouds of pipe smoke through his black beard, Stony Lonesome was pushing his great roan up the broad valley of the Littlehorn. Beside him, his sharp-nosed partner, Stingaree Stanton, sat like an acidulous gnome on his long-legged sorrel, Butterfly. Up ahead the buildings of Gooble Nutter's Frying Pan ranch lay flat on the plain with some twenty acres of red-oat hay that should have been harvested two weeks earlier, stretching down the valley.

"Trouble with Gooble," Stinger was saying, "he's never made up his mind whether to farm or ranch."

"Reckon you're right, Stinger," Stony agreed. "Poor old Gooble always has so much to do he never gets nothin' done right."

"Tries to do everything and ends up doin' nothin'," Stinger concluded.

Gooble Nutter has his troubles—but he soon gets Stony Lonesome and Stingaree Stanton to handle them for him!

On the slope above the grain a rider was frantically throwing and branding a bunch of about fifty steers. Stony and Stinger crossed a pole bridge over a creek that ran into the Littlehorn and turned left toward the mountains. They waved hello to Abbie Nutter as they passed the house and rode on up to the one-man roundup.

The cattle were a motley bunch that ranged anywhere from last spring's calves to seven-hundred-pound three-year olds. Gallumphing along on a heavy-footed black horse that he used both for plowing and working cows, Gooble was chasing a big stray that had taken out for high country. He got him turned, and pounding the black's ribs with his heavy work boots, drove him toward the branding fire. He swung a wide loop around his head, caught the steer by the horns, reined to a sudden stop and hoolihaned him.

The horse almost went to his knees as the big steer turned a somersault and landed on his side stunned. Gooble fell off with a piggin' string, grabbed a hoof, and then—given slack by the black who seemed as undecided about his work as Gooble—the steer struggled to his feet and charged them.

But Stony and Stinger had their ropes down. Stony dabbed a neat backhanded loop around the beast's front feet and, as he fell on his nose, Stinger noosed the hindlegs and they stretched him.

"Hot iron!" yelled Stony.

Gooble scooted to the fire and smoke came up from the steer's hide as he pressed on the brand.

"I swear and be damned," he said, looking up through half-wild blue eyes from under his wind-strewn shock of coarse red hair, "if this ain't the beatin'est job ever I tackled."

HE PULLED out a red neckerchief through the torn bottom of his hip pocket and wiped the sweat from his rutted, bony forehead.

"Turn him loose afore we pull him in two," Stinger yelled.

Gooble cast off the loops. The steer scrambled to his feet with a raucous bawl and made off bucking to ease the burn.

"What makes?" Stony asked as he coiled the three-eighths-inch rope that was like a piece of twine in his huge hands. "We come up to help you put up that hay, but you ain't even got it cut."

"Sorry, Stony. I know I told you it'd be ready, but I got troubles."

"You always got troubles, Gooble. What now? Where'd you pick up all them steers. Not more'n a few are your'n."

"I been maverickin', Stony. By gum I sure combed the high country. If them ain't my cows, nothin' ever was. I wore out every horse I got and scratched off nine-tenths of my hide gettin' 'em."

"Maverickin' huh? You're sure breedin' a hangnoose 'round your neck, feller. Come roundup you'll have to talk faster'n a goose in a grain bin, or you'll be lookin' up a tree with your neck broke."

"These'll never see roundup, Stony. I'm shippin'. By gum, any unbranded beef without a mammy belongs to the first man to dab a loop onto it. These would never showed up in roundup a-tall if I hadn't scrambled for 'em. They ain't never been outa the hills before. Wild as Paddy's goat."

"You ain't doin' this for fun, I reckon, Gooble. I know you ain't no cow thief by trade, and you ain't one to ride yourself down for pleasure. What's the answer?"

Gooble looked down and scuffed his toe in the dirt. "Well, Stony," he explained in an embarrassed voice, "You know that bunch of steers I was holdin' to sell and pay up my note to J. Tubelo Zero? They busted down the fence and got away. I couldn't even pay the interest.

"When I didn't bring the money in on time, Zero came out. When he seen the beef was gone, he declares I've got to raise the cash right away or he'll attach the ranch. I tried every argument I could think of, but that long drink of a lawyer wouldn't budge, so I started out to try to gather enough of my steers to cover."

"Howcome," Stony asked, "you got so

much stuff from other outfits?"

"Mine scattered all over the mountains. I tried to find 'em, but it would've took me all summer, so I picked up what I could."

"I thought the bank held your note, Gooble."

"Did, but they sold it to old Zero. He's been takin' over a lot of paper. Bank had more'n they could handle."

"Sounds bad. If I know that slab-sided patriot, you got your tail in a padlocked gate. Cold as a frost-bit cucumber, that shyster."

"Stony, I tell you, I'm desperate."

Stinger, warding off embroilment asked, "You don't expect us to go to jail helpin' yuh, do you?"

"I ain't askin' for no help, Stinger. I laid my soogans in this rut, and I reckon I can sleep in 'em."

There was a catch in Gooble's voice. He blew his nose thunderously.

Stony tapped his nubbly Corsican briar on his boot heel, pulled out his buckskin tobacco poke and went about stoking it.

"Don't say a word to Abby, now, Stony," Gooble admonished plaintively. "She don't know a thing about it."

"She'll know it when you end up in the hoosegow," Stony told him through a cloud of tobacco smoke. "You think you can drive these steers to town and ship without gettin' caught?"

"By gosh, they can't stop me. Can't no one prove these ain't my cows. They are, fur's that goes."

"Chances are you'll have every cowman twixt here and the Powder down on you afore you get 'em loaded."

"I got to risk it. If I don't I'm sunk anyway."

"It's a wonder," Stinger speculated, "that Zero wouldn't give you time to catch up your cows."

"I know," Gooble said, "I thought he might, but he was sure out of patience. He'd give me one extension, and the bank some before him."

"Ever occur to you it's funny he'd want to buy the note if it was overdue?"

"Well, I never give it much thought."

"If Zero's buyin' up doubtful paper, it ain't for charity," Stony added. "Looks to me like he's after bigger game."

STONY frowned. "Well, let's get 'em branded. Then I'll go talk to Zero."

"Thanks, Stony. If you want to help me I sure appreciate it, but—"

"Shut up."

"—but Stony, I can't wait for no talk with Zero. I got cars ordered, and I gotta drive soon's I'm ready."

"Well, we'll see."

"Here we go again," said the vinegary Stinger. "Why I come along with you, Stony, I dunno. One of these days you'll git me hung, surer'n a hog makes pork."

He swung his yellow horse away, and building a loop, took out after another steer.

It was nearly sundown when the trio approached the shipping pens outside of the little rangeland village of Cow Creek. Gooble Nutter had changed horses, but he, himself, was about done in.

There were no cattle cars on the siding.

"Thought you said cars would be waitin', Gooble," Stinger remarked sourly.

Stony added, "If we could ship tonight, Gooble, that'd be about our only chance of gettin' away with it."

"I swear, Stony, they oughta be here," Gooble said anxiously swallowing his oversize Adam's apple.

"When did they promise 'em for?"

"They said they'd be here yesterday. I reckon they're late. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Maybe they're late, Gooble, and maybe they got here yesterday, and went away again."

"Did you send word you'd be late?" Stinger put in.

"No, but—"

"Well, I guess you're outa luck. Chances are they got here on time, and findin' no cows here and no message, they just pulled out without uncouplin'."

"Stony, I hope not. If they did, it's my finish."

"Well, we'll soon find out. Let's corral

these critters. Then we'll ride in and ask the station agent."

As they pushed up to the pens they saw a slow moving buggy pulled by a ribby bay, coming out from town.

"Looks like Zero's rig," Stony remarked.

"That would be the pea that busted the pod," Gooble told him dolefully.

They had just pushed the last bawling maverick into the corral and swung shut the big plank gate when the buggy drew up. Stinger had ridden the gate and pushed home the two-by-six bolt. He climbed up and sat on the top plank and looked down on the skinny apparition as he pulled his equally skinny plug to a halt.

The man had a gray face almost as long as that of his horse. His hollow cheeked head was covered by an old buffalo hide cap with the hair coming off in patches that made him look like an old shedding sheep. A grease-glazed blanket coat hung over his bony shoulders and hips and a pair of shiny blue serge trousers encased his long legs and covered the tops of his scuffed boots.

The lean condition of his horse may have been accreditable to old age—but it was said that Zero knew to the last grain just how much it took to keep sufficient life in the beast to enable him to drag the buggy, and it was further said that the lawyer was as mean with himself as with his horse.

But no one who looked into the eyes of J. Tubelo Zero would ever believe that his apparently poverty stricken condition was the result of weakness. They were the color of dirty ice—and as cold.

"Hiya, Tubelo," Gooble croaked from the security of his saddle.

THE lawyer sat holding the reins in his lap, his eyes glinting shrewdly from one steer to another—but he said nothing.

Stony, towering over him on the great blue roan, reached for his pipe and waited. Stinger from his perch on the high gate, squirted tobacco juice at a fly that was sitting on a corral post absorbing the last heat from the level rays of the setting sun.

At last Zero spoke.

"Your cows, Stony?"

"Gooble's."

"Gooble's! Don't try to tell me that."

The tall lawyer's voice was like a pair of icebergs grating together in a ground swell.

"I told you, Zero," Stony stated laconically.

"Why, Lonesome, Gooble told me himself he didn't have any shipping beef not more than two weeks ago."

"Well, he's got some now."

"I don't know where he got them. I know he hasn't got enough money to buy any."

"What do you care where he got them?"

Stony wasn't giving an inch. If it was a question of matching wits, he wasn't afraid of J. Tubelo Zero—in spite of his reputation for tying a man up in legal knots and shaking him clean from cows to collar button.

"I happen to have money comin' from Mr. Nutter. If he tells me he hasn't any cattle, and then shows up with a herd of shipping beef, I naturally am suspicious and will take steps to protect myself."

"We know all about that. That's why he gathered this herd—so's he could sell 'em and pay you."

"Mm-m-m. . . . That big brindle over there now. Looks to me mighty like a JC bunch quitter broke away from roundup two years ago. That big dun with the broken horn over in the corral—ain't that the one got loose from Jess Warm over on the Pack Saddle when he hoolihaned him on a rock? Jess said he took out for the hills and ain't been seen since."

"What are you gettin' at, Zero? Gooble's got cows to ship and pay you off. What do you care where he got 'em?"

"Do you think I'm going to sit by and see my neighbor's cows rustled, Lonesome? I'm surprised to see you mixing in that kind of thing."

Stony's pipe had gone cold. His teeth clamped tighter around the stem and his

eyes narrowed slightly. He took the great root from his mouth and tamped the ashes with his thumb. Then he put it back, flicked a sulphur match alight with his finger nail and sucked the flame deep into the bowl.

Stinger and Gooble Nutter remained silent. J. Tubelo Zero had practically called Stony Lonesome a cow thief. Stinger knew that Zero knew that Stony could tear him apart with one hand between mouthfuls—and that if it came to gunplay, he, himself, could shoot him dead while he was fumbling for his gun. It looked like the lawyer was betting his cards high. Stony would want to see his hand.

When clouds of strong smoke were wreathing his bearded head, the deep voice of the giant broke the tension.

"Looks to me, Zero, like you don't want Gooble to pay off his note. That's a nice fat piece of bottomland he's got up there on the Littlehorn. Maybe you want it."

"No such thing. No such thing. But I don't want money from stolen cattle. I won't condone it."

"You've suddenly developed more morals than a hog on Sunday, ain't you?" Stony rumbled sarcastically. "Besides, we never admitted these cows is rustled. They all got Gooble's mark on 'em, and I don't see any others."

"Has he a bill of sale?"

"What would he want with a bill of sale if they're his own cows?"

PURSING his lips, the rusty lawyer let out a deep sigh. "Stony," he said, "let's stop beating around the bush. I know, and you know those cows don't belong to Gooble. Maybe a few of them, but that's all. He's been maverickin', that's what. . . . Now, if this gets around the owners of those cows will string Gooble up in a hurry. The fact is I'm fond of Gooble Nutter. I wouldn't have anything like that happen for the world."

"And so?" Stony threw it back at him.

The lawyer shifted restlessly in the buggy seat. He had no expensive habits like smoking or chewing to relax his nerves. He pulled out a square of old rag that he used for a handkerchief and blew his long nose.

"Well, the fact is, I'd ought to report this to the sheriff. I'm liable to get in trouble with him if I don't. But I'm willin' out of friendship to let it go. Obviously I can't take money for cows that's known to be rustled. But if I don't, the only way I can get my loan back is on the ranch. Gooble will have to deed it over to me."

He turned to Gooble. "Come in town when you get through here, and I'll have the papers made out."

The vinegary little man on the fence came to life. He'd held in as long as possible for a man of his temperament.

"Why you slab-faced old sour-gut. You've got more gall than a barrel of brass monkeys to talk about thieves. I'll personally send you to hell on the hot end of a bullet before Gooble signs anything."

J. Tubelo Zero's face turned, if possible, a shade paler. But it may have been from anger rather than fear. He looked at Stinger squarely with his cold muddy eyes.

"The sheriff might have something to say about that, too," he said sharply. He turned back to Stony. "What do you say, Lonesome?"

"I reckon Stinger speaks for us both," the big man answered.

Zero's slit of a mouth tightened. He picked up the reins, slapped the old horse on the back, cramped the buggy around and without a word headed for town at a slow trot—as miserly and depressing a figure as ever slogged along a cowtown road.

Stingaree shuddered on the fence. "That feller gives me the creeps," he said. "His eyes ain't human."

Gooble was slumped in the saddle, his clownlike face a forlorn picture of discouragement.

"Boys," he said, "I'm sorry. I'm terribly, terribly sorry. Looks like I not only lost my ranch and I'm facing a hangrope, but I got you tied into a rustlin' charge."

Stony's deep voice came bellowing from

his mighty chest in roaring laughter. His tremendous paw came down on Gooble's back with a slap that straightened him in the saddle.

"Cheer up, Gooble," he told his friend. "If we gotta go to hell, let's ride in with our spurs a-rattlin'."

"Just as I feared," Stingaree said as he hoisted himself aboard the camel-like Butterfly. "I've been tellin' you for some time that you'd stick that ugly hair mattress you call a head into one trap too many one of these days—and it looks like this is it. You can do as you please—but I've a mind to head for the high and lonesome while I'm all together."

"All right, you blasted scorpion," Stony told him with a chuckle. "I always figgered you'd turn out slim waisted when the river's up. . . . Come on, Gooble, let's you and me go see what that station agent has to say about cars."

Ignoring the Stinger, they kneed their horses ahead and made for town. Behind them the sunset made a backdrop of fire against the far blue mountains, and when they rode up to the station it had dropped entirely and they were enveloped in the dusty twilight.

THE agent was at the telegraph key taking an incoming message when the dirt streaked cowmen came up to the ticket office window. Presently he finished and came over.

"What happened about those cars I was supposed to have yesterday?" Gooble asked him.

"Why, Mr. Nutter, I sent them back. I thought—"

"Sent them back!" The distraught rancher slapped his forehead and reeled away from the window. "My gosh, why? Why did you send them back?"

"Why, your lawyer. They came in yesterday afternoon and I had them left on the siding. Zero came in this morning and told me you weren't going to be needing them."

"How did he know they were for Nutter?" Stony asked.

"Why, let's see. I reckon he asked me who the cars were for, and I told him; and then he said Mr. Nutter'd given him the message he wouldn't want them."

"Next time, young man," Stony said sternly, "don't take second-hand orders from anyone without some writin'. You've done a lot of damage."

Stony and Gooble looked at each other, and then an acid voice over their shoulders said, "Why that decayed mess uh spareribs—I'll jump down his throat and do a war dance on his liver."

It was Stinger, spoiling as usual for a fight.

"You'll keep your trap shut and lay low," Stony said. "This one we gotta make medicine on. We're in a bog hole up to our eyebrows with a two-ton rock on our head."

After supper Stony rode out of town after explaining that he wanted to talk the thing over with the valley ranchers. He told Stinger and Gooble to hold the beef on grass in case he didn't get back that night. Next morning they took the cows out of the shipping pens to let them graze while they waited for Stony to return with whatever news, good or bad, he might bring. The feed was sparse, and as four out of five of the brutes were bunch quitters anyway, the two men were kept busy trying to keep them from breaking for the rich meadows and the freedom of the hills to which they were accustomed.

Therefore they were not aware of the buggy coming from town until it was at the herd. Stinger was off toward the river on the heels of a long-legged dun, and Gooble, pulling up from a chase after a spotted three-year-old, was the first to see the approaching vehicle bumping over the bunch grass with the macabre figure of J. Tubelo Zero at the reins, and sitting beside him, the county's iron-jawed sheriff, Luke Waters.

Sweat was pouring out from under Gooble's flop-brimmed hat and half-blinding him as he apprehensively watched the buggy pull up, and the stern-visaged townsmen fix him with reproachful eyes.

"So you won't give up," Zero croaked. "I'd hoped you'd left and given yourself

some chance of coming clear of the rustling charge."

Gooble's Adam's apple raced up and down his throat, but words stuck at passing it. Sheriff Waters' eyes were roaming over the cattle. His inspection finished, he turned them on Gooble.

"I'm certainly sorry to see this, Gooble. I couldn't believe what Zero told me. Haven't you any sense at all?"

Gooble started to speak, but Zero interrupted. "Well, Sheriff, as long as he's sticking to his theft, I guess you might as well serve those papers."

"I suppose I might," the sheriff said.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a folded legal document, and stretched out his arm to the embarrassed horseman.

"What's them?" Gooble blurted out.

"Writ of attachment on your ranch," Zero told him.

"B-but, you can't. Why Abbie don't even know—"

"Sorry," Waters said, "but I got no choice. Papers all made out legal and given to me to serve. No way out."

At this point Stinger came spurring the ewe-necked Butterfly at a high lope and slithered to a stop beside Gooble.

"What's going' on?" he snapped.

"My ranch—they-they're takin' my ranch," Gooble explained sadly. He reached for his handkerchief and finding it gone wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Why you six-headed galoot," Stinger spat out. "You can't do that."

ZERO turned to the sheriff. He and his money were a power that Waters could not lightly ignore.

"Calm down, Stinger," Waters said. "Law's law. Don't buck it."

Off in the distance Stinger saw a traveling cloud of dust. It was to the rear of the buggy where Zero and the sheriff couldn't see it. Hope gleamed in Stinger's eye. "Are you speakin' for the law or for that muck-eyed thief beside you?" he stalled.

"No arguments," the sheriff said stubbornly. "Watch out I don't run you in for interferin' with an officer."

The sheriff reached out again with the papers toward Gooble.

"Don't you take them papers, Gooble," Stinger warned him. "You're not served till you do."

Three horsemen coming at a lope were now showing clearly under the dust cloud.

"One more word out of you and you're under arrest," Waters said.

The thunder of hoofs behind him came clear and he turned. Zero was already staring over his shoulder at the cavalcade. Senator Will Temple, owner of the Circle S, his spare figure erect on a powerful chestnut, his white mustache streaming along his cheeks, rode flanking him. In the middle were button-nosed, blocky, scar-faced Jess Warm of the Pack Saddle, and big Bill Brandt of the Double B.

The finely mounted horsemen circled the herd and then drew up by the buggy, an impressive trio. Senator Temple drew down his bushy white eyebrows.

"If this ain't the dangedest thing I've ever seen in my life. What in the world were you thinkin' of, Gooble?"

"My cows got out, Senator," Gooble answered in a weak voice. "They were collateral for my note to Zero and he come down on me. I swear, Senator, I was desperate. I didn't want Abbie to know about it. I went after them, but they were scattered all over, and I had to pick up anything I could. I didn't think—"

"No, I reckon you didn't. If you'd kept your fences up, you'd been all right. You can make more trouble for yourself than anyone I know."

"I reckon you're right. I should've got 'em mended—but I was gettin' ready to cut hay, and I didn't know about it till it was too late."

"Looks like you've made one too many mistakes," Big Bill Brandt added gruffly. "I suppose you know what stealin' cows means in this country."

Gooble had no more words. He was the picture of dejection and confusion.

"I've seen a man hung for gettin' caught with one cow, let alone the forty head of our stuff you've got there."

Jess Warm turned to Zero. "Looks like you could've give him a little more time."

"I gave him plenty," the lawyer whined. "The bank'd been carrying him longer'n they'd ought to start with."

"What's that paper you got?" Jess asked the sheriff.

"Attachment on Gooble's ranch."

"Looks like you're in an all-fired hurry about it."

Zero's lugubrious voice came from his boots. "There's a limit to my patience."

A train whistled as it slowed at the station. The agent came out and swung aboard, a little figure barely visible from that distance.

"Looks like Gooble's out both cows and ranch," Jess went on. "Ain't that enough punishment, men?"

Gooble's frightened eyes swung gratefully toward him.

"We've got to make a precedent of this," the old Senator said. "If we let this go, we'll have every wide-looper in the country swingin' a long rope."

THE train, all cars but two full of bawling beef eased into the siding by the loading pens. It stopped with the two empties abreast the corrals. The agent stepped down and came walking toward the group of riders, some papers in his hands. He stopped at the buggy and addressed J. Tubelo Zero. "I managed to get some cars for you, but they got to be loaded right away," he said.

"Never mind," Zero said hoarsely. "There seems to be some question about the ownership of these cows."

"We can't keep bringin' up cars here for nothin'," the agent complained. "This is the second time you've canceled an order for cars in two days."

"Sorry. Can't help it. Send 'em—"

"Wait a minute," Temple interrupted. "Did you say Zero ordered those cars?"

"That's right, Senator."

The old rancher fixed his bright blue eyes on the lawyer. "So," he said, his mustache bristling. "You were going to take Gooble's ranch away from him and then ship his cows, too. Why you're so slippery you'd make the underside of a snake look like a horse-shoein' rasp."

J. Tubelo Zero batted his muddy eyes. "Not at all, Senator. Not at all. I figured to do you a favor. Rather than to turn the animals loose I thought you'd want to have them shipped, and collect your money for them."

"With Gooble's brand on 'em," Jess Warm put in, his button nose and scar-slashed face making him look like a formidable pirate. "I think you're lyin'. Looks to me, fellers, like this sour-pussed yard of pump water is the one to blame for the whole matter. I ain't excusin' Gooble, but he kinda gets panicked under pressure. He wants to do the right thing, but he gets mixed up in his thinkin'."

Temple was gazing at Gooble and pulling at his oxbow mustache ends. "I think you're in as bad trouble as Gooble," he said quietly. "If you'd intended for us to get paid, you'd have let us know before you shipped."

Zero drew himself up indignantly. "I take that unkindly, Senator," he said dolefully. "I have only tried to serve the best interests of everyone concerned."

"I think you've been tryin' to serve the best interests of J. Tubelo Zero and no one else. . . . What do you think we ought to do, boys?"

At this point a lusty bawl sounded below the river bank, and all heads turned in that direction to see a red steer lunge over the edge. A hard pushed bunch popped up behind him. Four horsemen followed and pointed toward the herd on the flat.

"Now what?" Sheriff Waters asked in astonishment at the multiplicity of events that had filled the morning.

"That's Stony on the big roan," Stinger said.

"It's one of my boys on the apaloosie," Temple told them.

"Double B man ridin' the dun," Brandt remarked.

"Ain't no one else but my pardner, Augury Furt, forkin' that little rat-tailed claybank," Jess Warm added.

"Wonder howcome them all together,"

the sheriff speculated.

"Stray men. We each put a man in to piece out the season pickin' up stuff was missed on roundup."

"By gum, I wished I'd known that," Gooble put in sadly.

The new bunch of steers was coming up at a fast trot. Gooble was watching them intently. The men rode them into a tight circle, and Stony thundered, "Here you are, men. Cast an eye over these thorn wallopers."

"They're mine," Gooble squeaked excitedly. "By gorry, boys, them's my cows, the ones got out. I swear and be damned! No wonder I couldn't find 'em. You fellers had 'em penned up."

"Looks like you ain't the only maverricker operatin' on this range, Gooble," Stinger remarked sarcastically.

STONY was saying nothing. Reins lying crossed over his saddle he was industriously filling his pipe.

"How about it, Senator?" the sheriff asked. "Those cows are all in your brand or Brandt's or the Pack Saddle. Reckon they're yours, all right."

"I don't know, sheriff. I can't recognize more'n two or three belong to me. Our agreement was to mark what we recognized in the right brand and split the rest three ways."

"Howcome Gooble wasn't in on it?"

"We didn't think Gooble had any cows out."

"What you got to say, Stony?"

"It's this way, Sheriff. I couldn't quite figger howcome Gooble couldn't find his cows and had to go way up high and chouse out stuff that's been in the hills for years. Didn't quite add up. So when I learned last night there was stray men workin' it give me an idea. . . . More'n half of 'em are Gooble's all right. I seen 'em when he had 'em under fence on the Fryin' Pan."

"Howcome you didn't brand 'em, Gooble?" the sheriff asked.

"Well, I was goin' to just as soon as I got 'round to it, Sheriff," he said, "but I was behind on my hayin', and—"

Stony interrupted. "I figger this thing can be settled right here and now," he said. "We're all good neighbors. If they was my cows, I know what I'd do."

"What's that?" Jess Warm asked.

"I'm leavin' it up to you," Stony told him. "It's up to you fellers to decide."

Old Will Temple looked from one rancher to the other. They nodded.

There was a twinkle in the Senator's bright blue eyes. "Looks like we're just as bad mavericker as Gooble," he said. "Give me those papers, Sheriff."

Waters passed them over. With the law, J. Tubelo Zero didn't rate alongside of Senator Will Temple.

The Senator took the long legal document and tore it once across, twice across, and then into bits.

"I'll tell you, boys, let's ship both bunches—just about a tight fit for the two cars. Gooble will get his ranch back and enough to pay his note to boot—besides some cash against starvation. Everybody gains, and we'll all try not to get into this kind of a jam again."

"I sure won't, Senator," Gooble asserted fervently. "Not me. Never again."

He reached in his pocket for his handkerchief. Not finding it he laid his finger alongside his bulbous nose and blew it lustily, first the right nostril, then the left.

"I—I—Abbie—if ever she—"

"Forget it, Gooble," Temple told him. "We mean to let you ship all the time. We were just ridin' you to see if we could toll Zero into hangin' himself—but he hung himself higher'n a hen hawk with those cars."

He turned to the lawyer, but before he could speak that mangy-capped scab on the cow-country said, "Senator, this is illegal and irregular. You are all equally liable to action for branding cattle not belonging to you. I won't press charges, but at next election—"

"At next election time," Stony put in, his voice hardly raised, but still like summer thunder, "you're lucky if you're not breakin' rock for the county. Now high-tail it afore I pick up that buggy and break it over your head."

Dicky Bradford didn't know he knew what he wanted till a pretty girl made up his mind

ALWAYS WANTING SOMETHING

by BARRY SCOBEE

IT WAS Saturday afternoon, the third of the month and three days past payday. Bradford could tell by the saddle horses along the settlement's dusty street that a lot of Mexican cowhands were in from the ranches for the night and Sunday at home, and for the usual *baile*. And Americans too, hired hands like himself, and little men getting started on their own land were here in town.

Payday for a lot of them. Fun at the dance. Drinks in the saloon with cronies, and a poker or blackjack game. A big night. Bradford's face took on a sheen of eagerness. He spurred his horse to a dashing run. He wanted his pay. He wanted to get with the crowds and into the payday fun.

Copyright, 1945, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in the January, 1946, Rio Kid Western

He pulled up in front of the bank with a rattle and flourish. The boss usually left a list here for the bank to pay off, or was present in person to hand his men their wages.

He was present now, as Bradford saw when he stepped into the open doorway. The banker in his little office enclosure was saying to the ranchman:

"I tell you I want part of that loan, Burge. I can handle ten thousand of it."

"Want, want, want," echoed Burge Landrum nastily. "Honor my check for sixteen hundred spot cash right now and I'll come in Monday and salve you with the loan. I've got to have the cash this after—"

Then Landrum became aware of someone at the door and turned to see who was interrupting. He was a man, Bradford thought for the thousandth time, with a face as flat as a whiteface bull's and a little iron nose in the middle. The ranchman growled an order bluntly.

"Outside, Bradford. Wait till I come out in a minute or two."

Bradford's usually cheerful five-feet ten dawdled a moment on the boardwalk discontentedly. He knew all about Landrum's minutes or two. His roving glance went across to the little Del Rio eating shack. It was just after noon and he was hungry. His fancy boots promptly followed his glance.

"Hi, Betsy," he sang out to the lone occupant, a plump girl behind the short counter.

"Miss Betty Tyson to you," she said snappishly.

"Ha, Snakebite! I want a big dinner but I haven't time for it. Make it a cup of coffee with lotsa sugar, Sugar. And service, my charming maid, before Bullface Landrum gets through over to the bank."

She gave him a withering stare.

"You're always wanting something. Who do you think you are—a ranch owner? You forty-dollar-a-month cowpunch! Dicky Bradford."

"Well, everybody's always wanting somethin'. Aren't you?"

"Yes! I want a home. I want a bed and a stove and a dresser I can call my own. I want to be something besides a hashslinger that every two-bit cowhand yells at. I want—"

"A hubby to boss around," Bradford got in.

"You never had a serious thought in your life. They say you sleep sound because your head is empty. All you own on earth is a horse and saddle. It's all you ever will own except rheumatism! Dicky Bradford! Dicky-bird! Kicking post for Burge Landrum and don't know it!"

"My coffee, gentle."

She drew a boiling cup and splashed it at him. "Five cents, please."

"I've got it, sparrow." He dug into a pants pocket. He dug into another. A funny look crossed his face.

"Well, I'll be—I had a nickel. I sure did. Held onta it since last payday so's not to be plumb flat. Reckon I left it on the gold cookstove."

Coolly, insultingly, she took a nickel from her apron pocket and dropped it into the till. Dicky Bradford went hot in the face.

"Tramp," she said without anger, so that he knew she meant it, coldly and certainly. "Farley Lott is worth ten of your stripe. I wouldn't swap him for you with your fancy boots throwed in!"

"Yeah. Good, steady, sober, dumbhead Fumbling Farley—"

His words couldn't catch up with her as she heel-tapped back to the leaf doors and the kitchen. He lifted his coffee cup, and saw Burge Landrum bulge out to the bank porch. Dicky took a hasty swallow. It scalded his mouth. "Blazes!" he yelled and clicked the cup down and stomped out to meet his boss.

"You, Bradford," said the stocky ranchman, pegging up with his mincing steps, "I told you to wait outside the bank."

"I needed coffee—"

"Trim the funny stuff," Landrum snorted. "I want you for a job."

"On payday?" Dicky griped.

"I want you to collect up Brijido Garcia

and Tranquilino Aguirre," Landrum began, talking fast. "Ride out of town on the northeast road. Easy and casual, like you was going to the ranch. Do exactly as I'm telling you, understand? And don't talk to anybody. Come to Honey Jack's road, hit back on it towards the river. The three of you. Fast. Want you to receive eighty head of two-year-old steers. From across the Rio, savvy?"

"Wet cattle?" Bradford protested. "I've never mixed in wet cattle deals, Mr. Landrum. I'm not wanting to jerk Uncle Sam's whiskers."

"It ain't what *you* want. It's what *I* want. Git goin'!" snapped the rancher.

DICKY BRADFORD stared hotly at the ranchman. But Landrum stared him down, savagely. Disconcerted, anger thumping in him, Bradford crossed the street to his horse. Betty Tyson's words lashed back to him; a kicking post for Burge Landrum. For a moment he was close to rebellion. But Landrum was right behind him. Like Haley in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Bradford thought bitterly.

He got on his horse. Landrum stared up at him, waiting for him to start. Bradford started.

With set jaw, he rode the length of the ragged, false-fronted street but saw nothing of old Tranquilino or Brijido Garcia. Tranq wouldn't be in the saloon but Brijido might. Bradford stepped down from his saddle near the Two Republics "liquor lappage."

The spot was shaded by ancient cottonwood trees that cast a black shade. Bradford paused to think. If Landrum saw him go in to the Republics he might come and raise a row. Bradford put his hand out to lean against a gnarled trunk while he ruminated. His hand touched a man.

"Ugh!" he gasped, and saw that it was a U.S. Customs inspector, the man's uniform blending with the gray bole and the dusky shade.

Dicky Bradford thought instantly of wet cattle. A chill streaked through him. But he mustn't gabble. He started to lean against another tree, just to show that he was not hot and bothered, and touched another man.

"Pity sake!" Bradford jerked. "Where's the rest of you? What you hidin' for?"

They just stood motionless, silent, eyes regarding him in cold amusement. Until Inspector Long spoke—old "Pop" Long who was reputed to know what was in the mind of every man along the Rio Grande.

"Going some place, Dicky? Looking for somebody? Or dodging your boss? Or"—and he said this with a kind of drag in his tone—"working for him?"

"Yeah," said Dicky. "You look like tree frogs. What you want? Everybody is always wanting somethin'. You afraid of the sunlight?"

He didn't expect an answer. But his comeback at them made him feel better.

"Come in and have a short one," he invited, and turned to the saloon.

As he stepped up to the porch he saw Burge Landrum at the bank looking his way. He moved on quickly to the River Trading Company store.

A girl with black hair, paper cuffs, and a black sateen apron was showing shirts to a prosperous young ranchman named Ward Beesley.

"Hi, Roberta!" Dick greeted. "Sell me a neckerchief."

She came toward him with a half-wan smile.

"But you bought a neckerchief just last payday," she said a bit peevishly.

"Yeah, but I forgot to wear it," Bradford answered sheepishly. "I want a good noisy one to decorate me at the *baile* tonight. No. Hey, wait a minute. I forgot. I'm broke! The boss hasn't paid me yet."

Her brown eyes met his blue ones, steadily.

"Richard," she said softly, "aren't you ever going to grow up?"

"I'm a year older than you are."

Her eyes held steadily.

"Yes, you are," she said.

Something in her tone, behind the words, gouged him. His anger came back a notch.

"What do you want?" he said, nastily.

She shook her head. "Nothing, Richard."

The way she said it, or looked, scraped him still more. He turned to the door in a huff, and practically bumped noses with old Hark Lowery, one of the three or four big cattlemen of the region.

"Oh, Richard," said the old man. "Saw you come in here. Come on out if you've got time. I want to gab a little."

"Sure, Mr. Lowery. How are you?"

Around the store corner the solidly-built white-haired Hark Lowery looked at Bradford in an old man's admiration for youth.

"You husky colt!" he said. "And frisky, too. All your life ahead of you. How would you like to start out for yourself?"

"What do you mean, Mr Lowery?" Bradford liked this old man, respected him for his kindliness and honesty and fairness and always put on his best manner for him.

"Well, Richard, I've kinda got a proposition. Have had you in mind for some time back. My Panther Spring country —it's too far from my headquarters to give me any profit. Some rustling, and a cow or two dies of thirst now and then. I've been wanting to put a reliable young buck out there. If you're interested, and say you'll stay with it for five years, I'll put three hundred cows out there in your brand. All coming on with calves next spring. I'll advance you some money to get along on and give you half the increase. It would give you a nice long start in five years."

"But Panther Spring!" Bradford half wailed. "Sixty miles in the desert from nowhere. No neighbors. No nothin'. A man'd go wacky!"

The pleasant, quizzical look receded from the faded blue eyes.

"Well, all right, Richard. Just thought I would mention it. Don't want to overpersuade you."

OLD LOWERY walked away along the side of the store, toward his little shack back there. Richard swiveled around to the sidewalk. A big hand seized his arm, jerked him about. He found himself face to face with Farley Lott—big, all thumbs "Fumbling Farley."

"Drunk!" Bradford ejaculated. "For the first time in history!"

"Ain't neither drunk," Farley denied. "You leave my girl be, Dick Bradford."

"You— What girl?"

"Miss Betty Tyson, you know who." Farley let go of Dicky's arm and grabbed a handful of Dicky's shirtfront, surprisingly quick. "You be interferin' between us."

"Let go of me," said Bradford. Of all the ornery things that were happening to him!

Farley's huge mitt only tightened the more. He gave a tug, with the dangerous strength of a determined drunk.

"Let go, Lott," Bradford ordered grimly, "or I'll drag you out and flail the street with you like a wet sack!"

"You can't!"

Farley twisted and jerked at the shirt. The strength made Bradford think suddenly that maybe he couldn't. He did not want to fight. Not about a girl. In a saloon brawl, yes. But not over a girl. It always hurt a girl's reputation.

"Listen, Farley," Bradford wheedled. "I'm not interferin' between you and Betty."

"You do be so. I'm a-goin' to shake shense inta ye!" Lott drooled.

"No, Farley, no. Betty doesn't like me. She's got no earthly use for me. Told me so just a while ago. Said I wasn't worth your little finger."

"Do she?" Farley's grip relaxed a little. "She shay thash?"

"Yes, she shay—she said that. Dang it, man, she's in love with you!"

Farley let go all holds. He nearly fell down. His face lighted up like a burning haystack. But suspicion still sharpened him.

"You shu she shay sho?"

"Sure I'm sure. She's crazy about you, fella. She wants a home and a cow."

Farley began to grin. "Shanks, Rish'rd. You goo' feller. I go give her a big bug —I mean mug—hug— No, mus'n go till

I git a litle more—shober."

"Aw, go on now," Bradford urged. "Show you're the boss, before it's too late."

"Nope. Too drunk."

But Farley started in that direction anyhow. A half dozen steps away he stopped, pivoted around like an unanchored windmill, waved, and guffawed loudly enough to be heard to the river and back.

"How-haw-haw—wet cattle! Hoo-hoo-whoo!"

Bradford did not look around to see if the customs men were still there and had heard. Better act as if it didn't mean anything to him at all. He returned to his saddle and went in search of Brijido and Tranquilino Aguirre. They were at their homes.

Tranq merely nodded and said, "*'Sta buneo*—it is good." But young and dark cowboy Brijido Garcia scowled and swore, and his wife screamed after the three as far as they could hear.

"She wants to go to the *baile*," said Bradford. "Women always wanting something."

"She'll scour her knife in your reebs," said Brijido, sore and sullen.

"The blazes she will!" answered Bradford.

He was sore and bitter all at once. Sore at everybody and everything. He tried after a time, as they jogged along through the sunny October afternoon, to backtrail on what had made him so mad.

Bullface Landrum, telling him to stay out of the bank, as if he were a hired man. Betty Tyson and her forked tongue. Heck of a note, her putting a nickel in the till for his coffee. Insulting. The customs men—dumb way they had of just standing still and making a fella jump. Then there was Roberta Carroll asking if he wouldn't ever grow up. Hang women anyhow. They could sure get under a man's hide.

Old Man Lowery and his offer—what'd he want, expecting a man to hermit himself off sixty miles from nowhere? Or had it been Fumbling Farley that started him mad? Grabbing his shirt with the clutch of an idiot. The drunken yokel! Hoo-hooing about the wet cattle, too.

"Hey, Tranquil," Bradford asked suddenly. "You know where we're headed for?"

"No, senor." The middle-aged, iron-gray man was completely calm and incurious about it. "You said we had work to do."

"You're sure takin' it smooth," said Bradford. "How come you never ruffle up?"

"Because I want nothing except what the good Senor God gives me."

"Huh! Well, here's Honey Jack's road. We turn off here." They reined from the road that was little more than a trail into something even less. "We're going to the river," Bradford added, "to receive wet cattle."

Tranquilino shot a queer, startled look at Bradford, then at Brijido.

"What is it?" Bradford asked sharply.

Tranquil said after a while, in his own plaintive tongue, gently: "I would not hurt your feelings, Dicky. Nor Brijido's. I have worked for Mr. Landrum for all of ten years. Perhaps fifteen. It is hard to say. Time is like distance to a poor Mexican who thinks of such things. But I have observed that when Senor Landrum is finished with a man he"—Tranquil jumped to English—"shoves the work onto him, gives him the hard chores, rides him, gives him the danger."

"Yeah? What's he got against me? Or Brijido? Or you, Tranq?"

"Me, *nada*, nothing. But Brijido and you—"

Tranquilino shrugged sadly.

"Ha," said Bradford.

AT HONEY JACK'S, which was only three or four miles from the Rio Grande, they turned in. The old man kept bees, here in a wilderness of whitebrush that was said to make the best honey in the world. It was still in blossom. He came out waving his arms and shouting, his beard looking like a swarm of bees.

"Stay back, stay back, you infernal jeopardizers! My bees don't like the stink of hosses. You want to git stung plumb to the bad place?"

When he found that it was a drink they wanted, he brought a pail of water out to the fence.

"People always wantin' a drink of honey or something," he grumbled.

"Anything stirring around your personal county today?" Bradford asked.

Honey Jack bored at him suspiciously with his white eye, which he told strangers had got that way from the kiss of a queen bee.

"Why you ask that, Dick Bradford?"

"Well, you live close to the river and its sins, and keep your eye skinned."

"First place, smarty, it ain't my pussonel county. My bees only graze over fifteen, twenty thousand acres. Second place, they's too much stirrin' through Bee Sting Pass. Looks like the hull state of Texas is on the move. Seven men trailin' through. Then you three come a-moochin'. Too many population."

"Bee Sting Pass," said Bradford, shutting one eye and cocking his head. "That's the shortcut from town to Bedrock Crossing. Who were they?"

"How'd I know, question box? You know durn good and well you can't see who from here. Nothing only their heads and hats a-bobbin' along the rim yonder, like something loose on a clothesline. Only one I reckernized."

"Who was that, if you're not hidin' anything?"

"You know I ain't. One man rid up on the rim for a look over the country, I reckon. I spied him with my old spy glass. He was your own boss, that Burge Landrum."

"See you when the honey's ripe," said Bradford, and lifted his horse into a startled run.

The three kept up a steady lope. The sun was about as high as a horse and a man when they sloped down on to the river bottom below Bee Sting Pass. They were immediately in willow jungle. It was all blue masses of shadows laced with strings of golden sunlight.

"Just a minute," said Bradford, and stopped his horse. "Tranq, who do you suppose those riders were that Jack saw?"

Tranquilino shrugged that he didn't have an idea to his back.

"What do you guess Bullface Landrum is doing down here? Checking on us?"

"No guess, senor."

"Doggone it, I don't like the look of things," Bradford complained. "I don't like to mix with wet cattle either. Don't like gypping Uncle Sam out of import duties. If Buttonnose Landrum wanted to get rid of me he could have said so. I would have quit. He doesn't have to get me arrested or shot to lose me my job."

"Maybe so I better go look around," said Tranquilino. "See what is, no? Maybe I do not see you boys some more. I say goodbye, farewell to you."

He gave them his strong brown hand in grave, gentle parting. By the time he was out of sight in the sandy trails of the cane willows, sweat had popped out on Bradford and turned cold. It was gloomy here in the deep jungle. That smart old Tranq was on to something, and one Richard Bradford and one Brijido Garcia were the trap bait.

"We better hunt the *vacas* 'fore old Landrum catch us loafin'," said Brijido. "Better blow the wet off 'em and make 'em dry 'fore the customs *fiscales* grab us for the beeg jail."

They reached a point on a twining cow trail where another trail came in. Bradford pulled up uneasily. The shadows were thick, the sun streaks almost gone. To their ears came the steady bawling of a cattle herd.

"They on this side the Rio," said Brijido.

"How the heck," Bradford wondered aloud, "are we going to drive eighty head of two-year-old steers out of this fishpole jungle? Three of us, if Tranq hadn't quit us cold."

"Tranq ees smart," said Brijido. "We don't see heem no more."

"For a nickel I'd blow this and go back to the *baile* right now," Bradford muttered. "Only I don't like to leave Landrum in the middle of a job, even if he is trying to get me shot. I wasn't raised that way. Who do you suppose those other riders were that Honey Jack saw? One of 'em is that old tree-frog Pop Long, I'll bet. If that old coot is down here we might as well go sit on the penitentiary porch till they let us in."

"Aw, he too old," ventured the Mexican.

"Let's get on with the dirty work," Bradford said now. "Get eighty wet bulls out of here before it gets plumb dark—or we get shot. Blast Landrum! And Pop Long, too!"

They started their horses. Bradford's bay snorted and almost jumped out from under him. What Bradford saw then made his hair tingle. It was Customs Inspector Pop Long, standing very still against the shadowed willows about a horse-length away, grinning a little.

"Pity sake!" Bradford breathed.

Pop Long chuckled evilly. He pulled his horse from the bushes.

"You boys ought to grease your saddle leather so it won't squeak so loud, Dicky," he admonished. "I heard you coming and hid."

THEY rode on in silent disagreement. Wrath boiled higher in Bradford at every turn of the sandy trail. He was done for. Burge Landrum had got him into this. Like as not, Bullface had sicked Pop on to him.

The bawling of cattle grew louder. It plopped an idea into Bradford's harassed thoughts. Wasn't there something about a citizen getting half the value of smuggled goods if he turned the smuggler over to customs? Gosh, half the selling price of these cattle would put more cash in his pockets than he had ever dreamed of! All he had to do was to turn United States evidence to Pop, right here and now.

But he shook his head. He couldn't do it. Wouldn't do it. Wouldn't squeal on his boss. Not as long as he was taking Landrum's pay. But after—

Inspector Long was riding ahead. He raised a hand for them to halt. The bawling of the cattle was loud now, just outside the brush. Pop Long got down from his horse and motioned for Bradford and the Mexican to do the same. They tiptoed forward in the deep, soft sand to the mouth of the trail, where the willows ended and a stretch of river beach began.

Out there were the steers, close herded by half a dozen Mexican cowhands. Beyond them the river gleamed crinkly in the last of the red sun.

A few yards away, in clear light, three men were grouped, down off their horses. One was the sturdy, calm Tranquilino. Another was a big Mexican in a red sash and a silver-spangled sombrero as big as a haystack, the spit and image of a successful *bandido*.

The third man was Burge Landrum, with a thick sheaf of greenback money in his fist.

The big Don Sombrero was smiling easily and shaking his head. Landrum stormed out at him:

"You blasted swindler! Your agreement was twenty dollars a head. Now you want twenty-five. If the blasted customs patrol happened to show up here, you wouldn't get nothing!"

"What would you get?" Don Sombrero chuckled impudently.

"Take this money and get back across the river!" Landrum growled.

The don shook his head, smiling.

Inspector Pop Long murmured something about preventing crime and stepped out of concealment. Bradford and Brijido followed. They were unobserved by the other three. Off a short way, the other inspector that Bradford had seen in town and several cowboys immediately pushed out of the brush. It was then that Landrum and the big, fancy Mexican saw them all.

"You've got nothin' on me, Long," Landrum shouted. "No money's been passed!"

The Mexican sprinted for his horse. The

other inspector and his men dashed to surround the herd. Don Sombrero hit his saddle expertly, then was in the river with a tremendous splash. His herd drivers fled too. Pop Long ran back to his horse and raced to help take charge of the smuggled cattle.

When Bradford lost interest in the proceedings he looked around and saw that Tranquilino and Brijido had wisely vanished, probably hitting the trail for town. Bradford and his boss faced each other.

"You squealed to the law, you double-crosser!" Landrum shouted.

"Did I?" said Bradford. To be accused of that!

He went into the willows and got his horse. When he returned, Landrum was mounted. They started out along the river edge.

"If you didn't squawk," Landrum started in, "your blasted clumsiness tipped them off. You've knocked me out of two, three thousand dollars profit. You blasted lummox! You rumdum! You two-bit cowhand!"

Bradford stopped, cutting in front of his boss and making him stop. They were out of sight of the inspectors in charge of the herd. Bradford was seething with wrath. To be accused of crumbing the deal after sticking by the boss against his feeling about wet cattle!

"Listen, you crook," Bradford cried, "you tried to get me arrested or shot. Tried to force me to help you beat the law. You owe me a month's pay and three days over. Forty-three dollars and seventy-five cents. I want it, now!"

"You'll get it, dunderhead!"

Landrum got the money from his pockets and passed it over. Bradford jammed it into his own pocket safely. Then he dropped down from his horse.

"Get down, Landrum!" Bradford commanded.

"Why you—" Landrum bawled, and tried to jump his horse against Bradford.

Bradford sidestepped and grabbed the reins. He jerked Landrum's foot from the stirrup and hauled. Landrum spilled headlong from the lunging horse and landed in the soft sand. Then he scrambled to his feet and sent a piledriver fist at Bradford's midriff. And missed!

Bradford seized his arm and whirled him around, while his big hands took Landrum by the collar and the seat of the pants. Bradford then lifted the rancher from the ground and lugged him to the gurgling river, fifteen or twenty feet away. Landrum clawed and cursed. Dicky Bradford sat him on his feet at the water's edge and shoved mightily.

Landrum hit the water with a terrific splash. He went under. He staggered up. The water was swirling around his thighs. He spluttered and cursed and heeled water from his eyes.

For the first time in hours Bradford felt humorous. He thought of a line and spoke it:

"A bull at twilight," he said, and returned to his horse.

FOR A WHILE, on the ride back to town by the shortcut, Bradford felt good. What a tale to tell to the boys! He could see himself in the Two Republics, leaning back with his elbows on the bar, a heel hooked over the brass rail, telling the gang all about how he had ducked Burge Landrum, the big cattleman. Heh-heh-heh!

The night was well on when he reached the settlement. He had to pass the dance-hall. He stopped and looked in. About all he saw was Roberta Carroll dancing with Ward Beesley, the prosperous young ranchman.

Next stop was the Two Republics. He got down and looked in at the window. About a dozen men were left. They were standing in a half circle listening to a man talk, and grinning. The man was Farley Lott. He was leaning back with his elbows on the bar, a boot hooked on the brass rail. Telling them, Bradford thought bitterly, about how he shook me.

Bradford felt sudden shame that he had even thought of standing there and bragging to the gang about how he had ducked Burge Landrum. As far as he was concerned, he vowed, as he hit for the

Del Rio restaurant, the story would never be told.

Betty was not behind the counter. She had gone to the dance. The owner was just ready to close up. He grumbled and set out a few scraps for Bradford, who bolted them and slammed the door behind him. Well, anyhow he could go and shake a foot a while with Betty at the *baile*.

He paid his half dollar at the door, stopped at the edge of the floor. Betty was dancing. With Farley Lott. They saw him, and Betty dropped her head against Lott's breast. With his owlish stare at Bradford, Farley bent and kissed the top of Betty's head. Neat way of saying that she was his girl. In a moment they were dancing intentionally close to Bradford.

As they passed, Betty said proudly, "Farley can get drunk, too."

Bradford tramped up the street. He wanted something but he didn't know what. He passed the Two Republics without even glancing in. He was thinking. At the corner of the River Trading Company store he left the sidewalk. At last, he knew definitely what he was going to do.

He strode back toward old Hark Lowery's town shack. Lowery had an office in the front room and sleeping quarters in the back to use when in the settlement. There was still a light in the front. Bradford gave a quick, determined knock and entered.

Old Man Lowery and Roberta Carroll were there. From the look of them and the way their talk stopped instantly, Bradford sensed that they had been discussing him, and he said so. Lowery nodded agreement. Bradford knew now what he wanted.

"Mr. Lowery, I've come back to take that ranch proposition you made, if it is still open."

"Still yours if you want it," said the white-haired old man. "But it'll be mighty lonesome out there."

Roberta was looking at Bradford, lips parted, a kind of glory in her face. Bradford had always liked her. He realized sharply that he had been missing more than he realized. He said words to Hark Lowery but his eyes were on Roberta Carroll.

"Maybe the lonesome part could be overcome," Bradford said.

Lowery's eyes twinkled. Bradford took Roberta by the arm, hauled her up.

"I'll take you home," he said. Then, when they were outside: "How do you like the desert, Rob?"

"I've always wanted it," she said.

"Women always wantin' somethin'," he said and tried to laugh and couldn't, because he was looking down into her face and was awed by the wonder he saw there.

"Shucks," he said, tight of throat but trying to overcome it, "what's the use of goin' home? Let's go and dance. Dance all night with a hole in our stockin'."

She laughed, at nothing. He laughed, at nothing. They both laughed, at nothing.

The black-clad avenger faces odds in ZORRO'S FIGHT FOR LIFE, a full-length Don Diego Vega novel by Johnston McCulley featured in the July issue of WEST — 20c everywhere!

ROWDY ROMANCE

by S. OMAR BARKER

Handsome Rack Callahan leaves his flittin' fancies behind to celebrate his freedom, but—

MID-MORNING. The Hoot Owl Saloon was empty, except for one burly bartender polishing up.

Handsome "Rack" Callahan came in and leaned against the bar.

"Set out the tootin' tonic, Frog Face!" He addressed the white apron. "I've done thrown my hobbles!"

"Huh?"

Disdaining the whisky glass, Rack Callahan downed a lusty swig from the bottle.

"I'm a free man again, Frog Face. You no savvy 'free?' "

"Yup." Frog Face spoke impersonally. "Like when the jail burns up."

"Jail my glass eye!" The cowboy's fist pounded the bar. "Stone walls do not a prison make!" he orated. "Her eyes are like the mountain sky at morn, her lips are rosebuds dipped in wild honey and sweetly brushed with meadow dew, her hair is a golden trap of sunshine, to which I have been held a moonin' prisoner for two long years!

"Two years riding the straight and

Copyright, 1936, by Beacon Magazines, Inc., originally published in Popular Western, December, 1936.

The girl's eyes were like mountain sky at morn

narrow; two years of dreaming sweetly by night and dripping sweat by day. Two years of saving shekels and shunning liquor, of saddle slaving for her old man, instead of ranging far, free and famous like a curly wolf craves to do. Two years I've been a slave to that foolish, flitting fancy known as love—but now—set out another bottle, Frog Face! Once more I'm free."

"Yeah," said Frog Face. "But the drinks ain't."

CALLAHAN paid and leaned confidentially across the bar.

"I was a wild one, Frog Face, till she told me her old man aimed her to marry a sober, steady, stay-put son-in-law or nothing. It's taken me two years to prove I was that man—and then she turns me down!"

"Yeah," said Frog Face unemotionally. "Too bad."

"Too bad my eye!" Rack flourished the bottle in a gesture of triumph. "Can't you see I'm celebrating my freedom?"

"Yup."

"Crickets cricketing and the moon all yellow," went on the cowboy pensively. "So I ask her out riding. 'Sure be nice,' she sighs, 'but Dad don't approve of me riding of nights with a man.' 'Sallikins,' I says, 'I reckon you know by now that your dad's wishes are the law to me!'

"So there we set on the porch, an' afterwhiles I says: 'Honey-face, I asked your dad and he gave his consent, provided I keep right on sober and steady like I been. So I reckon all you got to do is name the day.' 'What day?' she says. 'Why our wedding day, of course!' 'Why didn't you ask Dad to name it,' she says, 'while you were asking?' So I says, 'Well, maybe I better,' but up she pops and heads into the house. 'You needn't,' she sniffs from the door. 'I wouldn't marry you if you were so steady thunder couldn't budge you!' And she went on in."

FOR a moment Callahan scowled at the memory. Then he continued:

"I laid awake all night, Frog Face, but by morning, I began to realize what a big favor she'd done me, cutting me loose from all that steady living once again. So when the old man raises the ante on me to stay, I advise him how to suck eggs, and I came racking on in to celebrate. I haven't felt so free since lizards were half an inch long."

"Yup," said Frog Face, "you ought to feel thankful."

"Thankful as a horse with cut hobbles."

"Yup. Did you tell her how thankful you were?"

"Nope. Come to think of it, I never. Come to think of it again, I ought. And come to think of it number three, by the rollicky smell of the big blue bottle, I'm going to! Yessir, I'm going back and thank that gal for turning me down, if it's the last thing I do this side of frying. 'Madam,' I'll say, 'I just want to express my everlasting gratefulness to you for bouncing me out of bondage!" *Glug.* "For setting me free!" *Glug.*

Weaving a little, but straight-backed and purposeful, Handsome Rack Callahan strode out of the Hoot Owl.

"Free my glass eye," the grinning Frog Face said, wiping spilled tootin' tonic from the bar.

Outside, Callahan teetered toward the hitch-rack. Town Marshal Simpkins stepped in front of him.

"Out of my way, Short-Horn!" said Callahan.

"Better hunt up a hay nest and sleep it off, cowboy! We don't put up with no day-time drunks around here!"

"Yeow!" yelled Callahan. "Just twist my tail if you don't think I'm a wolf! *Yeow!*"

And so saying, he yanked the astonished marshal's hat down over his eyes, up-ended him into a rain barrel, and swung to the saddle.

SEE *the World in Pictures*
in America's Most
ENTERTAINING
Picture Magazine!

Packed with Fascinating Photos and Features

•

Now on Sale—Only 15c Per Copy

If You Hurry, You Can Still Get Your Copies of these Big 1951 Anthologies of the Very Best in Western Reading—

TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL
and
ROMANTIC WESTERN ANNUAL

•

Now On Sale—Each 25c At All Stands!

At the Boxed X Ranch old man Burkholder held executive session with his dainty but defiant daughter.

"Two years," he stormed, "Callahan's been the steadiest hand on the ranch, till I was all set to make him a pardner—and you get flighty and turn him down! Aren't you the one that took a fancy to him at first when he came along so wild and woolly, and soft-soaped me into signing him on? Why—why, I figured you were plumb in love with him, Sallie!"

"Supposing I was? You think a girl with any spirit wants to marry a—a—Listen! What's that?"

Outside there arose a wild and raucous cowboy yell, announcing the arrival of the "old he-wolf from Bitter Creek, with a curl in his tail!"

Old man Burkholder frowned, strode to the door in time to see Rack Callahan swing dangerously from his shying horse to the high porch. The tall cowboy stood ramrod stiff for a second, then swung off his dusty sombrero and bowed low across its flourish.

"Greeting, Oh, Wart-Nosed Whisselsnort!" he orated. "I crave speech with thy fair daughter! Wilst trot her out, or trot me in?"

Old man Burkholder's ruddy face purpled with anger.

"Callahan," he snorted, "you're drunk!"

"An' why not, old Swivel-Eye? If you think I ain't a wolf, just twist my tail!"

"Swivel-Eye, eh? I don't allow drunks around here, Callahan! Clear out!"

"Your hat," said Callahan, "it rides too high!"

With a swift hand he yanked it over the old man's eyes. But the old man was neither old nor idle. With a bellowing shout he lunged, grappling with the cowboy. Maybe Callahan wasn't as drunk as he pretended.

"Out of respect to age," he panted, a moment later, straddling Mr. Burk-

holder's back, "I will administer this with my bare hand instead of a boot."

Smack! Smack!

From the doorway came something like a giggle. Sallie Burkholder had never seen her dignified dad get spanked before, and she seemed to enjoy it.

"Young woman," said Rack Callahan, getting up and starting for the door, "I've come back here to proclaim freedom."

TWO husky cowboys, who had come running in response to the old man's bellowing, jumped him all at once.

With a yowl of glee that he had not let loose in two long years, Rack Callahan unlimbered and began to fight.

"Hold him!" yelled the old man. "He's gone plumb crazy!"

With startled eyes Sallie saw the two cowhands and her father dumped unceremoniously off the porch. Then Handsome Rack Callahan, panting, but no longer wobbly or weaving, came striding toward the door. With a little squeal Sallie turned and fled into the house. Callahan yanked the door open and followed. He strode into the kitchen to face a dainty but deadly looking six-shooter held in a pair of small, shaky hands.

"I—I won't listen!" The girl stamped her foot. "You—rowdy!"

A swift brown hand snapped the gun from her fingers and flung it through a window. And by the time the old man and his cowboys came storming in after him, Rack Callahan was already out the back door, running toward the sheds where several saddled horses were dozing at the rack.

The girl still kicked and fought as he swung her to the saddle in front of him, and dusted toward the nearby hills at a gallop.

Beyond the first one he drew rein sharply, swung down and set the girl

[*Turn page*]

CHECK ASTHMA SYMPTOMS ANYTIME!

Anytime—anywhere! Convenient ASTHMADOR—in powder, cigarette or pipe mixture form—is always ready and easy to use. ASTHMADOR'S soothing, aromatic fumes bring welcome relief from the distressing symptoms of bronchial asthma. Economical, too. At any drug store in U. S. and Canada.

DR. R. SCHIFFMANN'S
ASTHMADOR

Advertising BOOK MATCHES

SPOT CASH PROFITS . . . REPEATS

World's Largest Direct-Selling Book Match Manufacturer offers you big opportunity in profitable year 'round business. Make money with MATCHCORP 20, 30, 40 and 240-light book matches. Low prices for high quality. Repeats. Full or part time; men, women. NOTHING TO BUY, giant 250-page catalog and other catalogs furnished plus selling information.

Get started right away—WRITE TODAY!
MATCH CORPORATION OF AMERICA
3433-43 W. 48th Pl. Dept. TG-81 CHICAGO 32, ILL.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!
The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 163K 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. Sent on Trial! Write NOW for free Booklet and Proof of Results. All correspondence confidential.
Brooks Company, 183-K State St., Marshall, Mich.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE
in Every Issue of
EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY
Packed with Stellar Features and Forecasts for Everybody
★ NOW ON SALE-25c *At All Stands*

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Don't wait! Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. If you can quit for 7 days, you've won half the battle. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:

NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S, HEWLETT, NEW YORK

TOOTHACHE?

Quick relief with Dent's. Use Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops for cavity toothaches. Use Dent's Dental Poultice for pain or soreness in gums or teeth. At all drug stores.

"Since 1888"

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS DENTAL POULTICE

RUPTURE

RELIEF...OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Simple, easy to wear truss made by old surgical house. You risk nothing. Write for free booklet. Don't delay.

WEB TRUSS CO. Dept. TF-8 Hagerstown, Md.

Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking."
NATIONAL BAKING SCHOOL, 835 Diversey Parkway, Dept. 180C, Chicago 14, Ill.

FUN FOR ALL THE FAMILY!

CHECK YOUR WITS
with
CHECK YOUR WITS
By JULES LEOPOLD

A Fascinating Book of Puzzles, Problems, Games and Quizzes

Now in a POPULAR LIBRARY Edition

25c AT ALL STANDS

none too gently on a rock. He stood before her, somehow feeling—and looking—silly. But he aimed to go through with it.

"Miss Sallie," he began stiffly, "I come back to tell you that I—I mean, I'm a free man now, you savvy? And it's you I've got to thank for—for—everything."

From toward the ranchhouse came the sound of hoof thuds. From her perch on the rock the girl with eyes like mountain sky at morn smiled up at him, with lips that were rosebuds dipped in wild honey and freshly brushed with dew.

"Shucks!" said Handsome Rack Callahan suddenly. "Who in blazes wants to be a free man, anyhow?"

A moment later old man Burkholder popped over the hill. His gun was out—but you can't shoot a man while your daughter's arms are around his neck.

"Hi, Dad!" said grinning Curly Wolf Callahan. "You got the son-in-law hobbles handy?"

Here Are America's Best Western Magazines

•

THRILLING WESTERN
GIANT WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN
POPULAR WESTERN
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
RANCH ROMANCES
TEXAS RANGERS
THRILLING RANCH STORIES
TRIPLE WESTERN
EXCITING WESTERN
WEST
FIVE WESTERN NOVELS
RIO KID WESTERN

•

Get Acquainted With Them All—Now on Sale at All Newsstands!

When You Learn The GENCO Answers to—

WHY

You should NOT brush your hair
You should NOT massage above hat band
You should NOT wear tight-fitting hats
You should NOT give up because other treatment "Techniques" have failed! . . . .

You owe it to yourself to learn all the benefits of the Genco Formula-Method that is absolutely different than any other so-called 'treatment techniques'—it explodes several theories on massage, brushing, combing, etc. IF you are worried about hair loss, then learn the "Why and How" of these exclusive formulae that *have definitely brought renewed hair growth to thousands of users.*

You'll want to benefit from Carl Genco experience in

HOW

YOU MAY HELP SAVE FALLING HAIR and

REGAIN REVITALIZED HAIR

WITH TIME-TESTED GENCO FORMULA *NOW AVAILABLE FOR THE FIRST TIME* FOR MAIL-ORDER HOME USERS!

Yes, you'll want to learn for yourself how you, same as thousands of other men and women can definitely enjoy the regaining of revitalized hair & scalp health by professionally-tested-and-proved use of the Genco formula. The exclusive Genco treatments using these formulae will convince you it can be done! They're not overnight "CURE-Alls" but scientifically-planned formulae that go to the "root" of your baldness trouble and do the job of stopping falling hair, dandruff, etc.

IT CAN BE DONE—Scores upon scores of users attest by "Before and After" conditions, that following the Genco treatment using the exclusive Genco hair and scalp formula, they no longer even worry about lost hair or falling hair—they have permanently regained revitalized hair, stopped dandruff, and scalp itch.

WHAT THE GENCO METHOD IS—In short, the Genco method prescribes, according to your scalp condition (see coupon below), the use of one of two complete Kit combinations of exclusive non-greasy, non-irritating, scientifically-controlled "Cleanser & Liquid" and "Cleanser & Ointment" formula. These formulae go to the "roots" of baldness conditions—and when properly applied by the exclusive Genco-below-the-hatband treatment they definitely help stop dandruff, falling hair, receding hair line, and in many authenticated cases Genco-method users have actually regrown hair and regained lost hair.

IF BALDNESS WORRIES YOU—Act NOW! Don't be discouraged because other "techniques" have failed to do what Carl Genco can do for you. Our low introductory kit $15 price is little to pay to regain hair.

HERE ARE PROOF CASES!

TELEPHONE WORKER —Troubled by bald spots—now a full, healthy head of Genco-revitalized hair. *Authentic:* Mr. Leo Lubert, Pgh., Pa.

MUSICIAN—From bald spots, falling hair to renewed and revitalized healthy scalp and hair. *Authentic:* Mr. George Campeau, Monessen, Pa.

STEEL WORKER—From almost total baldness to a head of handsomely healthy hair by the Genco Method. *Authentic:* Mr. Nick Podolachek, Pgh., Pa.

CARL M. GENCO
22 Years of Success

Discoverer of the amazing Genco formula and treatment, Carl Genco has won the thanks of men everywhere, in every walk of life, for his result-producing method and formula. No wild claims to regrow hair for everyone, for in some cases, baldness has been neglected too long. Carl Genco definitely claims that the Genco method can regain for you hair that is still alive but not vitalized—and partial baldness can be stopped.

EASY TO USE

These exclusive Genco formulae are not mystery applications—just a few days of diligent application according to the complete instructions given you with your order and you'll realize how simple it is to enjoy success, at home! Clean, non-sticky, odorless Complete kit lasts 6 to 8 weeks—order today!

22 YEARS OF TESTED & PROVED SUCCESS BACKS-UP THIS GENCO "HOME KIT" OFFER

UNCHALLENGEABLE PROOF The Genco laboratories have authentic proof with unchallengeable "before and after" pictures, that men and women, going bald, already bald, or having hair and scalp troubles have regained revitalized hair by using the Genco method and formulae. The identical successful formulae and treatment method that has cost as high as five and ten times the "Home Kit" price is now available for mail-order buyers—a result of mass acceptance of the Genco success. Remember—no price is too high to regain hair!

DON'T DELAY! **SEND TODAY—This Valuable "WHY and HOW" Booklet Given with Each Order!**

When you order, you get a complete "KIT" consisting of thorough instructions on the exclusive Genco method, and one of two (depending on your scalp condition—see coupon) Cleanser and Liquid/Ointment formula. You get an average usage of 6 to 8 weeks from your Home Kit Order. Special $15 price is for everything—PREPAID!

ORDER BY MAIL!

Check Your Trouble

Genco specialists are trained to send you the proper kit with proper instructions to correct your scalp-condition trouble. Fill in coupon completely when you order Remember—you save Gov't. C.O.D. & Postage charges when you send check or money order.

CARL M. GENCO Laboratories, 1312 Woodbourne Ave., Pittsburgh 26, Pa.

Send me at once, in plain wrapper, the complete Home Kit of Genco Hair & Scalp Formula & Method Instructions. I enclose $15. ☐ Check; ☐ Money Order (send postage prepaid). If you send COD ☐, I agree to pay postman $15. plus gov't postage costs. My scalp condition is:

☐ Thinning hair ☐ Falling hair ☐ Complete baldness ☐ Oily scalp and hair
☐ Bald patches ☐ Excessive dandruff ☐ Dry scalp and hair ☐ Annoying itchiness

(Please print name and address clearly in margin or on separate attached sheet of paper)

Now! YOU CAN MAKE MONEY...

TURNING WORTHLESS OBJECTS INTO VALUABLE TREASURES—

...BY CERAMIZING!

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE HUNDREDS OF ARTICLES THAT CAN BE TRANSFORMED BY "CERAMIZING"—INCREASED IN VALUE—OR "ETERNALIZED" AS KEEPSAKES WITH A VARI-COLORED COATING THAT HAS THE APPEARANCE OF THE FINEST KILN FIRED CHINA

Costume Jewelry from flowers, leaves, nuts, and shells.

Paper Weights, Trays, and Objects of Art from Nature.

"Ceramized" Busts, Figures from plaster, or wood carvings.

"Ceramized" Objects of glass, leather, plastics, or rubber.

"Eternalize" baby shoes, toys, and other sentimental mementoes.

"Ceramize" Baskets, Plates, Trays, and other metal objects.

Preserve sport and war trophies in sparkling simulated china.

YES—ANY MAN OR WOMAN CAN DO WORK LIKE THIS IN ONE CORNER OF THE KITCHEN OR IN ANY SPARE ROOM!

A Satisfying New Home Art Hobby Pays Up To

$5.00 AN HOUR for SPARE TIME

Amazing book tells you how

HOW to do the work—how to get customers coming to you—how to set up the simple equipment—how and where to buy the materials—what to charge—how to start in spare time—how to expand into a full time business whenever you wish. Shows you in pictures and words how to put a hard "Ceramized" finish on such things as flowers, leaves, insects, shells, wood carvings, plaster castings, busts, statues, religious figures, buttons, baskets, feathers, base balls, golf balls, mementoes of all kinds, such as, baby shoes, party and wedding favors and decorations. Operating a home "Ceramizing" business is one of greatest insurance policies a man could ask for his future. READ ABOUT IT WITHOUT RISKING A PENNY.

Think of turning 56 cents worth of materials into a profit of $5.00 for just a few minutes of easily learned handiwork. Think of beautifying your own home and amazing friends with the artistic skill you can master in less than an hour of study and practice. Sounds fantastic. Yet it's absolutely true ***...as you can QUICKLY PROVE to yourself.***

AN EXCITING NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR PLEASURE AND PROFIT!

Just at a time when hundreds of men and women would like to make an extra $35.00 to $50.00 a week in spare time home work—just at a time when hundreds would like a new outlet for expressing their artistic skills—just at a time when the country is turning to a revival of appreciation of beautiful handcrafts, the fascinating new art of "Ceramizing" is ready for you. Every step of this process can be learned in less than an hour of home practice.

The process is so simple that even a child can learn it. No knowledge of art or drawing is required. No knowledge of proportion or design is needed. You work with objects already created, or with the countless thousands of Nature's beautiful forms. You coat the object itself with a hard finish that has the appearance of kiln fired glazed china—and you apply a variety of colors. By following my simple instructions you can develop a deeply satisfying creative hobby—or you can use your hobby in spare time to make as much as $5.00 an hour. I even show you the easy way to get others to come to you for your products.

ALL THIS INFORMATION IS FREE

The information is free. A postage stamp brings you the exact plan by which hundreds are NOW MAKING EXTRA MONEY EVERY WEEK, in an artistic creative hobby. Study my plan. See examples of the beautiful work. Read the special marketing plans that bring you such big profits. If you're not "burning up" to get started, your only loss is a 3c stamp. Read the Plan at my risk.

NO "CATCH" TO THIS OFFER — DON'T SEND ME A PENNY ...Just Your Name!

Learn about this wonder "ace in the hole" business that can supply you with a good income—even when other sources fail. Learn how you can start a business in spare time—without risking job or paycheck—that can be turned into a full time business whenever you need a new source of full time income. Learn this Art Hobby that can lead to personal independence—an income producer that can be operated in the corner of any room in your home—in any part of the country. Scores of men and women have already started .. plenty of opportunity for hundreds more. BUT DON'T PUT IT OFF. Send your name and address today. It may open new horizons in your life.

R. E. Brandell, Warner Electric Co., 1512 Jarvis Ave., Dept. 248, Chicago 26, Ill.

R. E. Brandell, Warner Electric Co.
1512 Jarvis Ave., Dept. 248, Chicago 26, Ill.

Rush complete facts on the fascinating new Home Art Hobby of "Ceramizing." Show me how I can make as high as $5.00 an hour for spare time work at home. No charge or obligation for the information you send.

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

*City*_____ *Zone*___ *State*_____